



A novel with  
the ecstasy of Scruples!  
The power of Circles!  
The shocking  
intimacy of Lace!

# PASSIONS

A new  
novel by  
the author of  
Something Old, Something New

Lillian Africano

***Every woman  
has them.  
Not every woman  
dares to live by them.***

# PASSIONS

**Kate's life began the day her  
husband walked out on her...**

**Overnight she was free to soar  
to unbelievable heights...**

**Free to become a bestselling author...**

**Free to have the lover of her dreams...**

**Free to enjoy the passions every  
woman shares in the glittering  
world of success where every  
golden wish comes true.**

**Passions is her story, every  
woman's story—a story you  
will live, breathe and never forget...**



**ISBN 0-515-08103-5**



***"Are you afraid of me, Dr. Hardy?"***

He said nothing, pulling her closer, until she felt his breath against her ear, his body moving with hers. Almost defiantly, she thrust herself against him as they danced, challenging his reserve. She felt his breathing grow heavier as their steps grew slower and smaller—until they were scarcely moving at all.

She kissed him then, long and hard, just as she had imagined so many times, tasting his sweetness. She swayed against him, and they hung there for just a second.

Then, without loosing the tight grip he had on her, he led the way to his bed. There was no separateness, no unfamiliarity between them, as they searched one another, driven by a ferocity that blurred the landscapes of their bodies . . .

*Passions . . .*

***Every woman has them.  
Not every woman dares  
to live by them.***

# PASSIONS

Lillian Africano



A JOVE BOOK

## **PASSIONS**

**A Jove Book/published by arrangement with  
the author**

**PRINTING HISTORY  
Jove edition/February 1985**

**All rights reserved.**

**Copyright © 1985 by Lillian Africano**

**This book may not be reproduced in whole  
or in part, by mimeograph or any other means,  
without permission. For information address:**

**The Berkley Publishing Group,  
200 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.**

**ISBN: 0-515-08103-5**

**Jove books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group,  
200 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.**

**The words "A JOVE BOOK" and the "J" with sunburst  
are trademarks belonging to Jove Publications, Inc.**

**PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

*To the memory of my mother,  
who taught me about independence,  
courage, strength—  
and the wonders of starting over*

### ***Acknowledgments***

Special thanks to my children, Nina, David, and Arthur, for inspiration and love beyond measure; to Meg Blackstone, Beverly Lewis, and Elaine Markson, for understanding, guidance, and support.

# Chapter 1

"FOR God's sake, Kate—haven't you been listening to what I'm saying? How can you talk about working things out when I'm telling you I'm in love with another woman?"

Harry Sherwood pounded the kitchen table in frustration, as his wife Kate sat mute in a straight-back rush chair, her shoulders curled, her body slumped in an attitude of dejection and pain.

"Haven't you got any pride?" he went on, annoyed by her unwillingness to address herself to what he was saying. "I've tried to make it easier for you. I know it isn't your fault that things aren't working out. But for Christ's sake, any woman with backbone would have left me a long time ago."

"I couldn't leave you, Harry," she said softly. "I couldn't ever leave."

Her words stung him, made him cruel. "Laurie would leave me in a minute if I pulled any of this crap on her," he said, with such obvious pride in his choice of girl friend that Kate started to cry.

"Cut it out, Kate," he said roughly, not wanting to be moved by his wife's pain. "We wouldn't be having this conversation if you did what you should've done. We have nothing in common anymore. There just isn't any point in staying together. In a couple of years, we'd be hating each other."

She shook her head. "But I still don't understand, Harry. What did I do that was so terrible? I keep a nice home for you, I take good care of the children..."

"You do, Kate," he conceded, his voice more gentle now. "You're a terrific mother. And the house always looks great. But that isn't enough for me. I need someone who can keep up with me, who wants what I want, who doesn't think that

life begins and ends with marriage and a family. That's death for me, Kate. And you need someone who can appreciate what you have to offer."

"But I've done everything you asked me to," she protested, remembering all the self-improvement books she'd read, all the adult education courses she'd taken, in an effort to keep up with her dynamic, ambitious husband.

"I know you did." He remembered, too, how eager she had been to please, how all her efforts had been for him—and not because she'd had any need to participate in the turbulent mainstream of Manhattan life. "But I guess it just wasn't you, Kate. Look," he said, "I don't want you to feel abandoned or scared about the future. I still care about you, really I do. I'm going to live with Laura, but she makes almost as much as I do." Again there was that awful pride in his voice.

"You won't have to worry about money. I'll take care of you and the kids, until you get on your feet and see what you want to do. I'd appreciate it if you looked for another place to live. But take your time. I want you and the kids to be comfortable. I'm only going uptown," he said, in an attempt to reassure her. "It's not the end of the world, Kate. This kind of thing happens all the time nowadays. People work things out. Really."

She looked at him mutely, finding no comfort whatever in anything he was saying.

Sensing that the discussion was not going anywhere, he said: "Well, I'll be going now. I'll come back tomorrow. We can both talk to the kids. I'll call you." He dropped a kiss on her head, gave her shoulders a brotherly squeeze and left.

She sat in the chair, not moving, playing back Harry's words, trying to understand what she had done that was so wrong, what she had done to lose her husband's love. He had loved her once, she was sure of that.

Once he had held her close, stroked her proudly, possessively, as he would the body of a fine car. But somehow his pride of ownership had waned, leaving only disappointment that she brought him no status, no cachet. He had not forgiven her for being the wrong model. He had nattered and nagged, badgered her toward self-improvement, yet without any real conviction that she was capable of changing her style and lines. He did it out of pique and frustration at being stuck with a jalopy, while other rising young men toolled around town with sleek sports cars.

Once he had savored their differences. Had he forgotten, she wondered, what he had said on their third date? "You're so different from all the hard-edged women in this town. You're so soft, so loving. You make a man feel like he's the greatest success in the world."

She had accepted the proposal that came six months later, feeling that she was the luckiest woman in the world. She was going to marry Harry Sherwood: five-feet-eleven-inches of raw energy, a lithe and muscular body honed to perfection on the squash courts of the New York Athletic Club; crisp regular features chiseled from excellent bones and tight, clear skin; thick well-cut brown hair and lovely amber eyes that turned her inside out. It was easy for Kate to see him as a modern-day hero. At twenty-five, he was the head of a small but rapidly expanding public relations firm. He moved with confidence and ease in the world of movers and shakers.

She had been a third-grade teacher when they met at a fund-raising reception for the Museum of Modern Art. He had introduced her to fine restaurants, to expense-account meals, lavish in their excess; to first nights at the theater, where before she had known only balcony seats. To private movie screenings, where she had only sampled long lines at neighborhood theaters. It had been a fairy-tale world, one she had visited regularly with Harry.

To her, the real world had always meant a home and children. She had hoped they would buy a house in Connecticut or New Jersey after Sarah was born. But Harry had pointed out how selfish that would be, how grueling the daily commuting would be, how suburban life would take him away from "where it's all happening." Instead they had moved from Harry's one-bedroom bachelor apartment into a townhouse duplex with a garden on one of Greenwich Village's finely manicured streets. Her taste for country furnishings was reflected only in the big homey kitchen and in the children's bedrooms. The rest of the house was decorated according to Harry's preference for expensive modern design with a European flavor.

In summer, they usually rented a cottage in the Hamptons, where Harry could meet and mingle with the right kind of people, while she and the children played on the beach.

It had been a wonderful life in many ways, luxurious beyond any of her childhood fantasies. She had tried not to notice Harry's impatience when she made dinner-table conversation about the children's latest accomplishments. She dutifully read

all the books he brought home to help her "keep up with the real world," tried to accept the hints he threw out about women who "did things"—things that had nothing to do with children and laundry and dinner menus.

She had no real ambition beyond what she had already accomplished. Even her teaching job had been a kind of preparation for motherhood. She liked sitting on park benches and talking to other mothers—even though Harry teased her about wasting time with people who were boring and dull. She liked listening to the details of other people's lives, enjoyed hearing about problems with husbands or children or broken washing machines.

As long as she felt secure in Harry's love, she hadn't minded the criticisms. She knew she wasn't as special or interesting as Harry. In fact, she had always thought of herself as rather average. When she looked in the mirror, she saw a trim figure on a five-foot-four-inch frame, thick blondish-brown hair, even, white teeth and clear brown eyes. A nice smile, people said, but she didn't think there was anything about her that would turn heads. Average. And she hadn't minded that either, not as long as Harry loved her. In a curious way, she had almost reveled in her averageness. It was, she liked to think, her protection against a changing and sometimes frightening world.

Kate had divided the world into two segments. One belonged to the solid citizens who had solid values and who wanted good basic things, like homes and families and honest work. Then there were the "others"—the superficial, the glamorous, the dope users, the divorcees, the lost souls whose children ended up on psychiatrists' couches. She had tried to stay apart from this world, had tried to make a safe, solid haven for herself and Harry, one that would keep him securely anchored, even while his work brought him within its seductive, glittering borders.

She had tried not to notice when Harry started staying out late, making excuses that became more and more perfunctory. She had tried to ignore the unfamiliar perfumes she smelled on his suits, the proliferation of matchbooks he dropped regularly on top of the dresser, testimony to his frequenting clubs, discos and exotic restaurants. She had tried to resist the questions and the fears raised by the phone-message memos he threw casually on the same dresser, memos with women's names on them, with the name "Laurie" appearing regularly and often.

And she had done nothing, telling herself that it was all part of his work, that it didn't mean anything, that Harry belonged to her and the children. She had not asked: "Who's Laurie?" Not even when she could no longer escape the realization that they had not made love for months.

She remembered the rising panic when she finally began to count the weeks, then months that Harry hadn't touched her. Sex with him had been regular, like his squash games and his visits with his accountant. It was hard not to notice when the pattern was broken.

Harry made love like a weekend athlete, a man who worked at it, determined to keep all his systems operating at peak. When the workouts no longer included Kate, she had to ask herself why.

Almost immediately, she began to form rationalizations. He was busy, he was tired. It was only natural, all her books had reminded her. A man wasn't interested in sex when he had business pressures on his mind. She told herself that Harry's business was his first priority. When he had everything in order, normalcy would return.

She had to believe that. The alternative was to remember her own childhood: being raised by her mother, since her father had walked out when she was eight, in a home that had a funereal atmosphere since that day. She listened to her mother's bitter monologues about the dangers of choosing a man who was weak and ineffectual, who was paralyzed by the responsibilities of earning a living and raising a family, who fled these responsibilities and was never heard from again. "Missing in action," her mother would say tartly whenever anyone raised questions about Kate's father.

And Kate took from that the lesson that a woman should choose a strong, competent man, a man who knew what he was doing and where he was going. Then there would be happiness and a secure home. A life rich in the joy and companionship she hadn't known as a child.

She had done everything right. Harry. Then Sarah and Josh. And when her little world had begun to crack, the simple question *why* began to surface with alarming regularity. But the fear of having that question answered set her silence in paralysis.

Now Harry had told her, in words, since subtlety had not worked. It was because he didn't love her. He loved someone else. A woman named Laurie. A woman who was undoubtedly

as beautiful and clever and glamorous as he was. A woman who wouldn't take any nonsense and who earned almost as much as he did.

Now Kate's luck had run out. Her average, solid values had failed to protect her. It was the end of the world, her world, no matter what Harry said. As she tried to take in the implications of what had happened, to think of what she might do tomorrow and the day after that, she felt as if there was nothing, nothing at all she could do or wanted to do.

And then she thought of her children, her precious Sarah and Josh. She would have to tell them that their father was leaving. That it was somehow her fault. She dreaded the moment when . . .

Children! Suddenly she sat upright in her chair and looked at the clock. It was almost four o'clock, and she had promised to be at Josh's classroom at three-thirty to pick up her assignment for the annual parent-child school fair. He would still be there, waiting and wondering what had happened to her.

She ran out of the house in a tired sweatshirt and jeans, wishing she could fly the four blocks to the school, praying she could wipe away the anxiety and disappointment she would surely find on Josh's nine-year-old face.

She almost didn't hear the voice that called out to her, from the other side of the street. "Mrs. Sherwood, oh, Mrs. Sherwood—over here!" She stopped abruptly, scanning the street in search of the voice. She saw him—her Josh, with Margo Pellegrini, one of the other class mothers, and her son, Christopher.

She dashed across the street, gasping with relief. "Oh, Josh," she said, hugging her child with such intensity that he winced. "Oh, Josh, baby, I'm so sorry I didn't get to school on time."

"What happened, Mommy?" Josh asked, his face registering more curiosity than concern, now that his mother was there. "Miss Krantz got mad and she was going to call you up and then Mrs. Pellegrini said she would take me home. Were you sick, Mommy?"

"No, Josh, I wasn't sick. Not exactly. I wasn't feeling well, but I promise it won't happen again." She looked up at Margo. "I'm so sorry. I lost track of the time—oh, this is awful . . ."

The tall, exquisitely groomed woman looked at Kate, appraising her helter-skelter appearance and her obvious agitation. "It isn't awful at all. I had to spend some time with Miss Krantz after school. It seems Christopher has been a little too original

in his approach to English composition, and she wanted to impress upon me the need for an immediate solution. When you didn't come for Josh, I offered to walk home with him—and to take him to my apartment if you weren't there. Now that we've found you, there's no problem at all. Except I think you'd better send an excuse note to Miss Krantz in the morning." She paused for a moment and looked at Kate again. "We were going to have some refreshments if we didn't find you. Would you like to come along? We live only two blocks away."

Kate looked at her rumpled clothes. "I'm not really dressed for visiting," she said. But she did not want to go back to the house with Josh. Not yet. Sarah had basketball practice after school, and she could let herself in with her own key. "If you think it's all right . . ."

"Of course it's all right. No trouble at all."

Kate had second thoughts about her appearance when the door to Margo's apartment was opened by a uniformed maid and when she looked inside and saw the enormous, beautifully appointed living room, furnished with antiques, Oriental carpets, expensive bibelots.

"Come on," Margo invited. "Let's go into the garden room." She led Kate past the formality of the living room, out onto a jalousied terrace filled with green plants and furnished with wicker and chintz. "Could we have some coffee, please, Thelma?" she called out over her shoulder. "And something for the boys? They can have their snack in Christopher's room."

"Now," she said, as Kate seated herself in a flower-cushioned armchair. "You look like you've had a difficult day. Would it help to talk about it?"

Kate looked at the woman's face. It was a beautiful face, a magazine-cover face, but there was a softness in the eyes. "My husband left me today," she blurted out, surprised at how easy it was to say the words to a relative stranger.

Margo responded with quick sympathy. "Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry."

"He wants to live with another woman."

"How awful for you." Margo reached out and covered Kate's small square hand with long creamy fingers that tapered into perfectly lacquered nails. "Perhaps he'll change his mind," she said.

"No—no, he won't. He's wanted to do this for a long time. He told me. He's angry that it's taken so long."

"Nevertheless, he may still change his mind. Sometimes

when people do what they think they want to do, they find out it's not what they want at all."

"Do you think so? But Harry always seems to know exactly what he wants . . ."

"He wanted you once, didn't he? Maybe he will again."

Kate thought that over. "Yes, he did. But everything seems to have changed so much. I remember . . ." she began, launching into an abridged version of her marriage history. After the second cup of coffee, she paused and looked at Margo.

For her part, Margo was not impressed with the sound of Harry Sherwood. But the poor woman sitting before her seemed to think he was the most desirable man in the world. "You know," she said, "in all of this, you haven't thought of one possibility."

"What?" Kate turned red-rimmed eyes in Margo's direction.

"We've talked about Harry changing his mind. We've talked about how your marriage has changed. But, you know, it's just possible that you will change. That after a while, you won't want him back."

"Oh, no," Kate protested, "that could never happen."

"Never say *never*, Kate. That's an absolute condition, and nothing in the human condition is absolute."

Kate smiled weakly. "Thank you for listening. There really wasn't anyone I could talk to. And I'm really sorry about the mix-up at school."

"Don't mention it again. I assured Miss Krantz that only a bona-fide disaster would have kept you away. I think you'd better send her a very imaginative excuse tomorrow, or you'll be in for one of her inimitable scoldings."

"Okay. Thanks for warning me. And for covering up."

"It was my pleasure. I'm glad we finally had the chance to meet properly. I've seen you at school, but we never seemed to do more than nod and smile."

"I noticed you," Kate said. "I thought you were beautiful. I just never had the nerve to talk to you."

Margo laughed. "That's funny. I noticed you, too. I thought you looked . . . interesting . . . but you always seemed so busy and preoccupied."

"Interesting? Me?"

"Yes. You."

"I don't think so. But preoccupied, yes. I guess I have been a little worried these past weeks . . . maybe without even knowing exactly why."

"Perfectly understandable. And now we've met. Maybe we can be friends."

"Thank you, Margo. I think I'm going to need a friend."

"I'm here."

"I think I'd better go now. Sarah will be home, and I don't want her to get worried."

As she walked the short distance to her home, Kate reflected on Margo's impulsive kindness to someone she hardly knew. It had helped a little, to pour out her story to someone who wouldn't judge or criticize her. She thought wryly that Harry would have been impressed with Margo, with her beauty and her beautiful surroundings. Margo didn't seem to *do anything* either. But Harry wouldn't have left a woman like that. He would have enjoyed seeing heads turn, seeing the admiration and envy in other men's eyes. The thought startled her. She had never really analyzed Harry in such a cool, dispassionate way. Maybe it was Margo's suggestion that she might one day change her mind about Harry. She didn't really believe it, but she prayed that it might be true.

Long after Kate had left, in a flurry of promises to meet again, and apologies for being a bother, Margo sat quietly, curled up on the couch, as the maid took away the silver coffee service. She had genuinely liked Kate, had warmed to the other woman's quiet dignity, had been touched by the intensity of her pain. Whereas she, Margo, always moved through her world with what others took to be cool detachment, there was a side to her that was passionate and emotional. It was a side that surfaced when she'd had a shade too much to drink, a part of her personality that made Mario frown. For that reason, she tried to keep it hidden, under control.

Common sense had done a lot more for Margo than passion ever had. Even though she now had everything she had ever dreamed of as a young girl, she never fully trusted fate not to take it away. Kate's story had moved her. Yet in a way it was like hearing about an airplane disaster when you were scheduled to fly. It made you feel that the odds were with you, at that particular moment. Someone else's divorce did not make her feel superior, just luckier.

She did not believe that Mario, her strong, successful and very attractive husband, would be with her if it did not suit him to keep her. She had seen him dispose of employees, even those with years of long and faithful service, when the occasion

called for it. When the idea of being dispensable troubled her, she told herself defiantly that she might well do the same. Suppose, she asked herself, just suppose he were ruined financially. Would she stay with him, when money and power were so much a part of his attraction?

She remembered a cocktail-party conversation, a story about one of Mario's business acquaintances, a man who had suffered serious financial reverses. Mario had concluded the story by saying, in that dry ironic way of his: "And of course his wife divorced him, leaving with his last million." He had looked over at Margo, a hint of a question in his raised eyebrows, and she, like a comedian accepting a straight line, had responded: "Of course."

Wasn't that what he'd expected, she'd wondered a second later, as she watched a trace of some emotion pass over his face. Was it disappointment? Had he expected her to make a heated case for love surviving adversity? He would have laughed at her, surely. Or would he have liked her to contradict him?

She had forgotten that conversation in the flurry of small talk that had followed. Yet she remembered it now. Not for the first time, she wondered how well she really knew her husband. And for that matter how well he knew her.

He certainly knew how to handle her. She had no doubt about that. He could read her facial expressions and her body language. Sometimes he seemed to see her moods coming before she knew they were upon her.

She had never quite mastered his subtleties, but she knew well enough how to please him. She knew how to make him desire her, when to stay away. She knew how to please him sexually, how to present herself and how to perform. She pleased him as no other woman had. He had told her this once, in the aftermath of their one and only violent quarrel over his affairs. He had given her that compliment, as a crumb.

Later, he had made love to her, told her that she was like caviar, adding, with a mock-rueful smile, that a man required occasional variety, even if it was of a humbler and far less desirable variety. He had wanted her to smile, too, to accept what he would not change, to turn a blind eye, to not let petty jealousy interfere with the smooth machinery of their marriage.

She had tried. Sometimes she thought she had succeeded, by simply not thinking of what Mario did when he wasn't at home. Yet there were still those moments, times when she almost winced with pain. They were times when she watched

him, at parties or business gatherings, appraising another woman as he would a piece of property he wanted to acquire.

When Mario arrived home that evening, a little later and perhaps a little more tired than usual, Margo was up and waiting, her blond hair twisted into a simple knot, her creamy skin highlighted with shadings of golden apricot along the cheekbones, her blue eyes outlined in deep azure. She wore a simple caftan of embroidered Damascene silk which rustled softly as she greeted her husband, taking his briefcase and his jacket.

"Good evening, my love. You look quite delectable, as always," he said, his tone giving the words an ironic, rather than a complimentary quality.

"Thank you. Would you like a drink before dinner?"

"Just some white wine. The Pinot Grigio. I'll take it in the study. I've had dinner," he finished, without making any apology for the meal she had held for hours.

She brought him the wine without comment or complaint, watched him sip it appreciatively as he glanced through the newspaper. Her visit with Kate made her study him reflectively, with pristine eyes. He was not a tall man, a fact that made Margo avoid very high heels when they were together. Yet he had a commanding presence, an aura of money and power. He had the coloration of northern Italy, the fair skin, the hazel eyes that could mutate into gray or green. His blond hair had silvered early. Cut close to the head, it accented the long narrow nose, the high cheekbones, the thin, finely drawn lips and gave him a classic profile. There was no fat on his slender frame. He preferred the subtle refinements of northern cuisine to the robust and hearty flavors of the south. His body was strong and well-cared-for, honed to almost boyish proportions by ferocious tennis games and relentless skiing.

"How was your day?" she asked, when he looked up from his paper.

"Difficult. But interesting. There's a small electronics firm I want to acquire. Some complications have developed."

She said nothing as she got up and positioned herself behind his chair. She loosened his tie and slid her fingers inside his collar, stroking and kneading the muscles of his neck and shoulders. She saw his eyes close, his mouth relax into a small smile.

"The project is still quite manageable," he continued. "A few complications just make the thing more challenging. As long as I know I'll have it in the end."

She murmured her appreciation of his business acumen, watching his face as she continued her ministrations. Even relaxed he was like ice. Like tempered steel. Sharp and dangerous and cutting. This was, she thought ruefully, one of the elements that drew her, fascinated her. Even after they were married, that sense of danger was what made her feel most womanly, vulnerable, soft. Each time he smiled his approval, each time he desired her, she felt an intoxicating rush of relief, as if she had, like Scheherazade, won herself another day's favor.

As he finished his account of the maneuvers he planned for the takeover of the electronics firm, she admired, as always, the nerve and daring with which he took his risks. Not rashly, but with the same calculated detachment with which he enjoyed the exercise of his power, his wins and successes and even his possession of his wife.

He brushed her wrist with his fingertips and she shuddered. He would want to make love tonight. She knew it, even as she watched him get up and refill his wineglass, slowly and deliberately. He would make her wait, because this, too, was an exercise of his power. His mood told her that he would take her to his bed tonight. He would watch her as his hands traveled her body, sometimes teasing, sometimes bruising, making her gasp for breath, rousing, hurting, until her body was crying for him, until her patience broke and she reached for him. Then he might, if it suited him, make her wait, until her own desire began to ebb, before he took his own pleasure.

He finished his wine, set the glass down and extended a hand in her direction. She came to him. He put his arm around her waist, and together they walked toward his bedroom. Suddenly he stopped and pulled her to him for a long hard kiss that left her breathless. He looked at her, the familiar thin smile on his lips. "Ah, Margo," he said, "you're so easy. Quite delectable—but easy."

And as she followed him toward his bed, she wondered what it was she heard in his tone: amusement, affection or something else.

They sat in the Sherwood living room, a congregation of strangers related by blood and legal ceremony. Kate and Sarah and Josh had arranged themselves on the couch, with Harry facing them, seated in his favorite chair.

As Harry cleared his throat and started to make what he

would have described in other circumstances as a presentation, Kate felt, for the first time since he had walked out, a hot rush of anger and antipathy. This man she had admired and loved was behaving like a salesman pitching a package, making a hard sell to an audience. An audience of three to whom he had committed his love and his protection. Now he was wheeling and dealing his way out of that commitment and trying to convince everyone concerned that it was all for the best.

"I know this is hard for you to understand," he was saying to the children. "But when you're older..."

Suddenly Josh left his place and ran to his father, clutching at Harry's neck with tiny arms. "I don't want you to go away, Daddy. I want you to stay here."

Harry looked at Kate accusingly, as if she were somehow responsible for this outburst. "I can't stay here, Josh. But I'll come to see you. And I'll call you and Sarah. I promise."

"Take me with you, Daddy. Please take me with you," Josh pleaded.

"I can't, Josh; I can't take you with me." Harry's voice cracked, and for the first time since the nightmare had begun, Kate saw something reassuring in her husband's behavior. Something human. Well, she thought, at least he still feels something for Josh and Sarah.

"But after I'm settled," he went on, "after I'm settled, you and Sarah can come to visit. I'll be happier, and we can have fun together. I promise."

But Josh was no longer listening. He was sobbing and choking and hiccuping all at once. Kate got up, gently pried his fingers from Harry's neck and took him into the kitchen for a drink of water.

"I think I'd better go now," Harry said to his daughter. "I'll come back tomorrow to see you." He bent down to kiss his daughter, who sat rigidly, resisting his embrace. "Bye, baby."

As soon as she heard the door close, Sarah ran to her room, closed the door and threw herself on the bed, refusing to let Kate comfort her.

Kate went back into the living room and sat quietly, trying to make some sense of the confusion that had overtaken their lives. All of this felt like a trip through Never-never Land. If her marriage had made any sense in the first place, then what was happening now was a terrible mistake. But if *now* was real, then what else could she feel but confusion and bewilderment?

Who was he, this Harry Sherwood, this man she had felt so lucky to marry? She closed her eyes and tried to conjure up his face again, but the image was smudged with tears and cracked with pain. He was an attractive man, or was he? Those eyes that used to dance with excitement when he was hot on the trail of some important new client, some big new deal—could they also be furtive and shift? Was that how they had been just now, while he was trying to sell divorce to his children?

She noticed in retrospect that he hadn't mentioned Laurie in his presentation. Had that been out of consideration for the children? Or out of a need to protect his own shiny Daddy-image? When exactly did he plan to produce Laurie? Then what could she say when the children asked, as they certainly would, why Daddy was living with Laurie and not with us? What would be an honest answer, an answer they could live with, an answer that wouldn't tarnish her own value, cast her as a mommy who was somehow defective and deficient?

Her head seemed to be filled with questions that had no answers, experiences that offered no cross-references, nothing that would help her sift through the confusion.

Without thinking she wandered over to her personal bookshelf. There they were, all the forgettable novels that had once been chic and trendy, bought so they could be discussed intelligently at parties. And the self-help books, bought so she could be more . . . more what? More like what the titles promised: *How to Reach Your Full Potential*; *Making Love Last*—she grimaced at that one—had she known something when she bought it? *More Than a Woman* and *Rational Problem-solving* and *Stress and the Overachiever*—she'd picked that one up when she'd believed Harry was driving himself too hard. And *Coping* . . . yes, she thought, she could use a little of that now.

Without knowing exactly what she was doing, she pulled the books off the shelf one by one and carried them into her bedroom. She stripped off her clothes and crawled into bed, fanning the books around her, staring at the titles. She picked one up and opened it, but the words seemed to make no connection with her brain. She closed her eyes and laid her hands on the shiny covers, as if all the information, all the collective wisdom and help they promised might somehow flow through her by osmosis and infuse her with the strength she needed so badly.

## Chapter 2

"MRS. Sherwood?"

"Yes?" Kate did not recognize the voice on the telephone.

"This is Mrs. Rand in the principal's office. Sarah has had a little accident in the playground. It's nothing serious, so please don't be alarmed. She just didn't seem to be looking where she was running. The school nurse thinks she may need a stitch or two. Can you come for her?"

"Oh, God!"

"Please don't get excited, Mrs. Sherwood. Really, it's just a small cut."

Kate was on the verge of leaving at once when she thought that Harry should be notified. It could be more serious than Mrs. Rand had said. She would take Sarah to St. Vincent's Emergency Room. It was across the street from the school. She took a moment to dial Harry's office. "This is Mrs. Sherwood," she told the receptionist, feeling like a liar for using the *Mrs.* "Could you tell my husband"—again a lie—"that Sarah has had an accident and that we're on our way to St. Vincent's Emergency Room?"

"Of course, Mrs. Sherwood. I hope everything's all right."

"Thank you."

Kate and Sarah were in one of the small treatment rooms, waiting for one of the residents on duty to return and suture the cut, when Harry arrived, looking breathless and worried.

"What is it, Kate? What's happened? I got here as quickly as I could. I left two clients sitting in the office as soon as I got your message."

"Sarah fell against the fence in the schoolyard. Her teacher

said she seemed to be running and crying and not watching where she was going. They're going to put in two stitches. I thought you'd want to know."

She watched the relief on his face give way to annoyance. "Look, Kate—you know I'm as concerned about the children as you are." He paused. "Could you step outside a minute?"

When they had moved far enough for Sarah not to hear, he continued. "You seem to be handling this fine, without me. I don't want you to get into the habit of calling me for every little crisis. It's not going to work. When I told you I'd try to help you out, I meant big things, big emergencies."

"I'm sorry," she said, realizing he believed that she was using Sarah's accident as a way of drawing him back to her. She felt a pang of fear. She could not afford to make mistakes like this, to provoke Harry's anger. Without Harry's goodwill, her situation would be infinitely worse. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "I thought you'd want to know. I won't do it again."

"Of course I'd want to know, Kate. But you could have called later, without making me leave my work in the middle of the day."

Annoyed though he was, Harry stayed until Sarah had been treated. He walked his daughter and his soon-to-be-ex-wife home, then left them at the front door. "I have a million things to take care of. I'll call tonight to make sure Sarah's feeling okay."

"Thank you for coming," Kate said, her voice humble, penitent, though it felt very wrong to be apologizing for expecting Harry to act like a father. "I'm sorry I took you away from the office."

"It's all right," he said evenly, so she couldn't tell whether or not he was still angry with her.

They parted, and she went upstairs to put her daughter to bed.

"Where's Daddy?" Sarah asked drowsily after Kate had settled her comfortably in bed. "Why didn't he come upstairs? Doesn't he care about me any more?"

"Of course he cares." Kate reassured her with a conviction she didn't really feel. "But he knew you were going to be all right. And he did have an important client waiting in the office. You know how busy Daddy is." And how selfish. The thought startled her, as she stroked Sarah's hair. Was it true? Or was it just an expression of her frustration and disappointment? She shook her head impatiently, trying to clear away the doubts

and questions that had become her daily companions since Harry's departure.

She went downstairs to the kitchen, to finish the cleanup that Sarah's accident had interrupted. Suddenly her hands began to shake. She sat down, hugging her midsection, trying to steady herself as another thought surfaced, the one she had been pushing away each time it threatened to form. She was alone. Really all alone. With two children who depended on her for everything. On her. There was no one she could turn to. Harry had made that clear. Only big emergencies, he had said. But what about all the small things, the hundreds of small things that lay ahead?

The numbness that had cushioned her through the first shock of Harry's announcement was wearing off. In its place was panic. Stark, terrifying panic. She clenched her teeth and closed her eyes, willing her self-control to take hold. But still, she felt as if she were coming apart. She opened her eyes and the room started to spin. She was terrified. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before. She thought of calling the family doctor. But she didn't know what she would tell him. She had always been strong, healthy, self-possessed.

Fighting the waves of nausea that rose in her throat, she dialed the number that Margo Pellegrini had given her. She gave her name to the maid and waited.

"Kate, what a nice surprise. I've been thinking about you."

"Margo, I hate to do this to you, but I'm feeling really awful. Could I talk to you for a little while?"

"What's wrong? Has something happened?"

"I don't know. Well, actually, Sarah had an accident at school. I had to take her to the hospital. She's all right now. I called Harry, and he got really angry. Now I just seem to have the shakes. It's scaring me. I've never experienced anything like this before."

"Would you like me to pick up the boys and come to see you?"

"Oh, Margo, would you? Oh, God, I'd be indebted for life."

Margo laughed, trying to lighten the other woman's distress. "Really, Kate, you don't have to go that far. A simple cup of tea will do. And, listen, playing doctor is not really my thing, but it sounds to me as if you're having a king-size anxiety attack. Just part of daily urban life, Kate. Let me bring you some Valium, little ones. If they don't chase the shakes away, you can see a doctor tomorrow."

When Kate hung up, she felt a little less desperate. She would have some company for a little while. She had not called any of the friends she had shared with Harry, not since the day he had left. She felt embarrassed and awkward at the prospect of seeing any of them. She didn't want anyone's pity, or any of the questions that would certainly be asked. And she didn't see how any of the "interesting" people she and Harry had entertained would find anything worthwhile in her. Margo was a godsend. She didn't belong to a shared past. She didn't even know Harry.

By the time the buzzer signaled Margo's arrival, Kate was almost calm. She took a quick look around the apartment. Kate had always taken pride in her home, but these past few days, she had let things slip. As she opened the door, she was already making apologies: "I'm sorry, I haven't really finished straightening up today . . ."

"Stop," Margo commanded. "I promise not to look for dust. Heaven knows what my place would look like if it weren't for Thelma. Come on," she said, "let's give the boys some junk food to keep them busy. I brought this for you." She produced a tiny tablet from her purse. "Take it—go ahead. It's very weak, but I think it will help. Then we'll have a good strong cup of tea."

Kate obeyed, allowing Margo to take charge of the boys and the tea-making, which she did with remarkable ease, considering she had never been in Kate's kitchen before.

When they were settled over steaming cups of tea, Margo asked: "How's your daughter? The accident wasn't too serious, I hope?"

"No. She's asleep. They gave her something to relax her. I wish they could have done the same for me," she said with a weak attempt at a smile.

"Ah, well," Margo smiled back. "Wouldn't that be lovely? To sleep through all the unpleasant times in life?"

Kate was startled. Somehow she hadn't imagined that Margo had that many unpleasant times. Yet the revelation wasn't that hard to believe. Margo's was not a sterile kind of beauty. There was character and vitality in her lovely face. Her wide blue eyes were not innocent of sadness nor was her delicate, fair skin free of character lines. "I don't know you very well," Kate said, "but I thought that you . . . had everything in your life under control."

"I do. More or less. Sometimes more, and sometimes less.

So what happened to you today? Was it just Sarah's accident?"

"I don't really know. Not exactly. Harry just dropped us off..."

"Harry? Why didn't he come inside to make sure you were all right?"

"Oh, no, he couldn't. He was very busy at the office. Anyway, he was angry with me for calling him in the first place."

"Angry? In God's name, why? He's the child's father!"

"I'm still trying to figure that out. I guess he was telling me that I wasn't allowed to bother him with that kind of thing any more. Not unless it was a big emergency. I guess he meant life or death."

Margo made a face. "That sounds disgusting to me, Kate. Mario, my husband, would be furious if Christopher had an accident and I didn't inform him. I know he'd feel that way even if we were separated."

"Well, maybe there are..."

"Don't feel you have to explain Harry to me. I don't even know him. But I'm going to take the liberty of saying that he sounds like a stinker."

Kate laughed. While she and Harry had been together, she had never thought of him as a *stinker*, even when she was angry. Now, just a little earlier, she had thought *selfish*. And Margo's *stinker* didn't sound too far off the mark at this moment. Maybe that was one way to make some sense of it all. She laughed again. And it felt good.

"There, isn't that better? A little Valium, a little tea, and a little laughter. Nature's helpers."

"Don't forget the company. I really appreciate your coming here. I don't know what..."

"You're welcome. But I promise you I had nothing better to do. Honestly. The trouble with having your life under control is that it gets awfully... I don't know... predictable."

"Right now I think I could welcome *predictable*. If it was nice."

"Maybe. Let me leave you a couple of pills. Just in case. And for good measure I'm going to show you something I learned in yoga class. Instant tranquillity. Here, sit on the floor like this. Now put your legs in this position. Easy now, don't pull anything. Your hands like this. Now close your eyes..."

After Margo left, Kate felt calmer, less frightened, but the questions started to come again. If Harry wasn't all she'd be-

lieved him to be, then why hadn't she, the woman who lived with him day in and day out, ever seen the flaws in his character? She had never thought of herself as brilliant or even very wise, but she would have said that she had common sense. What had happened to that when she had promised to love, honor and obey? Had she promised to obey? She couldn't remember, and she felt that the inability to remember that was in itself important. Had she been so grateful for Harry Sherwood's attentions that she would have promised anything?

The questions made her restless, and she began to walk through the rooms of this home they had made together, as if there might be some answers in the placement of the furniture or in the style of the objects they had acquired together. There was, she reflected, very little that might suggest "Kate" in these rooms, and she wondered how she had managed to become so anonymous within this marriage.

She went to the cabinet that held the family memorabilia: pictures, postcards and programs from concerts and plays, cards that had accompanied flowers and gifts, the tender souvenirs of a shared past.

Then she pulled out her high school yearbook. Kate before Harry. She must have been a person then. Someone identifiable. She turned the pages, looking through the class pictures. There she was, a little blurry, but pert and bright and rather cute. Not so different from the way Sarah might look in a few years.

Group snapshots. Kate with classmates. Boys with their arms around her, apparently pleased with her company. And there she was—chairman of the Dance Committee, captain of the cheerleaders. She had forgotten the energy and enthusiasm of those days.

She turned to the class poll, and there she was again, with Larry Henderson—Class Pals. And still again, with Bobby Kandinski—Most Versatile. Her eyes lingered on that one. Most Versatile? The kids at Wilson High had thought so.

And then what? Four quiet, uneventful years at a huge state university. Lost in the shuffle there, while she held a part-time job to pay for books and the nominal tuition. Maybe that's when it had all happened, she reflected, the lapse into anonymity. In her free moments, she had joined clubs, supported causes, opposed war and pollution. But the excitement had been brief, the dates few. The female population at the teacher's college had outnumbered the male by about five to one. And

most of the other women seemed brighter, prettier and much more deserving of notice than she did.

She had graduated with a B average. Average indeed. And so she had begun teaching—and waiting for Mr. Right.

Now Mr. Right had come and gone. He had awakened one morning, taken a look at the woman sleeping beside him and said: "This isn't what I want." Mr. Right had said she was wrong. Had she always been afraid of that possibility?

Here, among these souvenirs of her past, there must be some clues. Of opportunities missed and turns not taken. Reasons why she had become so dangerously passive, a victim of her own fears.

## Chapter 3

"GOOD evening, Madame Sherwood. *Comment ça va?*" the familiar voice greeted her when she picked up the phone.

"Paul! What a surprise!" Kate was genuinely surprised to hear from Paul Harmon. He was an artist, one of Harry's clients. Harry had never really liked Paul. Kate suspected it was because the artist was gay. But Paul had been a regular at their parties, because Paul's notoriety, as well as his artistic achievements, made him an authentic celebrity.

"You're overwhelmed," Paul crooned. "Well, I'm sure I don't blame you. But brace yourself, darling. I'm in the neighborhood, and I've decided to pay you a visit. If you're not otherwise engaged, that is."

"Not likely, Paul." She laughed, an edge of bitterness in her voice. "I'm sure you've heard that Harry's left me. And I don't see anyone beating down the door to carry off a thirty-six-year-old mother of two."

"Oh, come now, Kate. Yes, I know about Harry. But I hardly see you as one of New York's needy and destitute. And I won't listen to you going on like that; self-pity is too, too *outré*. Put on a pretty smile and a fetching dress before I arrive. Dreariness depresses the hell out of me."

This time her laughter was genuine. "Oh, Paul, you're too much."

"I wish, sugar, I just wish. *À bientôt*."

When Kate hung up, she was intrigued and a little puzzled. Most of their married friends had defected, which was all right with her. She could see where her new single status would be a social liability, a reminder of what could happen to those who considered themselves happily married.

But what did Paul want with her, she wondered. He was, after all, Harry's client. He had a social life that was positively

kaleidoscopic, stretching from his duplex penthouse on Central Park West to his farmhouse on Shelter Island—around the world, to chic homes in Acapulco, Cap d'Antibes, Cortina and heaven-knew-where else. His picture appeared regularly in *People* magazine, in *Women's Wear Daily*; his name was on the lips of every gossip columnist. His parties were like surreal fantasies, peopled with the very rich, the very social and the very strange.

She remembered the first time Harry had invited Paul to dinner. He had been so excited at the prospect of entertaining his first major celebrity client. That evening he had been glad of Kate's homemaking skills. He had approved her menu of homemade country pâté, to be followed by poached salmon with her own secret sauce accompanied by slivered green beans and baby carrots and a spinach and endive salad. Dessert was Kate's inimitable lemon mousse.

She remembered, too, how Paul had called a few hours before he was due to arrive, asking Harry if he might speak to her. "Hello, Madame Sherwood," he had said. "I just wanted to ask if there was something I might bring you, other than my charming self and the usual *vin de politesse*."

"Well." Kate had looked at her dinner preparations. She was running a little behind, and Sarah was a little fussy. She didn't really have the time to make a trip to the market. "Actually I'd appreciate it very much if you could just bring a bit of garlic. I need it for the salad, and I seem to be out."

Paul had shrieked with laughter. "Garlic—well, of course, why didn't I think of that? I can hardly wait to meet you, Madame Sherwood. *À bientôt*."

She had turned to see Harry scowling at her. "Are you crazy, Kate? The man's an artist—and you ask him to bring groceries? He's going to think we're a pair of yokels."

"He didn't seem to mind," she had said, defensively.

"Okay, okay, forget it. But please don't make any more mistakes. I want to keep his account. By the way, the man's a homosexual, so be careful you don't say anything that might offend him. And please change your clothes. Wear that black hostess gown I bought you."

"I will, Harry, I will. I have to feed Sarah first. I don't want to get the dress messed up."

"And that's another thing—next time we have a guest for dinner, get a baby-sitter. I don't want you to be jumping around if Sarah needs anything."

Yet in spite of all the mistakes that Harry kept warning her against, her first meeting with Paul had been a great success. He had arrived bearing a few enormous bulbs of garlic, wrapped in florist paper, as well as a box of twelve gold roses. "For you, Madame Sherwood." He had bowed as he presented his gifts. "Put these in water or cook them or whatever you like. I'm entirely in your hands this evening."

She had giggled and thanked him, deciding on the spot that Paul Harmon was probably the most fascinating person she had ever met. He was tall and very slender, almost emaciated. His face was dark and handsome, with a long aquiline nose, high Slavic-looking cheekbones, thin beautifully shaped lips, and a suggestion of dissipation and ruin in his deep-set black eyes. He was wearing a white pleated shirt, a suit that looked almost Victorian and a fur coat that reached almost to his ankles.

She had liked Paul at once, and that first evening she was an appreciative audience for his outrageous stories and his even more outrageous jokes. Harry complimented her on the success of her dinner, and there had been many dinners, many visits since then. Paul had prospered, and Harry had added to his list of distinguished clients, often on the strength of Paul's name.

When she heard the door buzzer, she ran to answer, eager for some company and laughter on what had promised to be a quiet and lonely Saturday night. She hugged Paul fiercely, grateful that he had thought to pay her a visit. "What a nice surprise," she said. "Come in. Don't you look beautiful, as usual."

"Don't I though?" He pirouetted gracefully to show off the latest addition to his collection of his personally designed suits. "And this is for you," he said, as he presented her with a bottle of chilled Pol Roger champagne and a box of chocolate fudge. "You sounded like you needed some sinful indulgence, and I am always ready to sin or indulge. So hurry up and get us some glasses while I pop this cork."

As she went into the kitchen, she felt her eyes welling with tears. She was touched by Paul's concern. She suspected that it was not a coincidence that he found himself, unattached, in her neighborhood on a Saturday evening.

She came back into the living room with a pair of her best fluted glasses. "Thank you, Paul," she said softly.

"*Mais non*," he protested. "Thank you for allowing me to barge in on you."

She felt the tears come again. He looked at her closely.

"You can cry if you like, Madame Sherwood, though God knows tears unnerve me—unless they're my own. If I knew you were this blue, I'd have brought you some of my best Colombian coke."

She laughed at the suggestion. "Oh, Paul, this champagne is just lovely—and I'm not really the coke type, as you must have noticed."

"What I've noticed," he said, taking her hand, "is that you're a wonderful and very real lady. And you can be any type you want. And Harry Sherwood is a horse's ass."

"What did Harry tell you? Did he . . ."

"As it happened, I told him I wanted the two of you to come to my party, after the Castelli opening. Naturally the brute was forced to tell me that you were separated. He had the nerve to ask if he could bring his bimbo instead. Well, of course, I shrieked with outrage. I told him that if he ever brought any other woman within a hundred feet of me, he'd never see any more of Paul Harmon's business. *That* took him down a bit, I can tell you."

Kate laughed again. "I can imagine. But you might want to change your mind, Paul. I don't think there's much chance he'll be taking me anywhere."

"Never. With Harry, it's business. With you, Kate, it's pure love. Don't you know how much your friendship has meant to me? It's been an island of normalcy in my otherwise depraved life. And contrary to popular mythology, sexual deviates can be loyal. So, if you're available, I'll take you to the party myself, if you promise to dress down so everyone will notice me. Promise?"

"Promise. I'd love to be your date, Paul. I haven't been out much, not at all, actually, since Harry left."

"You will, Kate, you will. And soon you'll be having such a good time, you'll see how much better off you are without Harry. Truly."

She shook her head. "I don't know if that will ever happen."

"Trust me, Kate—it will. Do you remember Carlo?"

Kate cast back in her memory for an image of Carlo, a blond cherub who had been Paul's constant companion for about two years. She nodded.

"He left me, you know. That vain little creature left me for a nelly Hollywood director who promised to put him in pictures. It almost killed me, Kate. I can talk about it now, but then . . . I cut my wrists, you know."

"Oh, no!" She was shocked. "I never knew . . . oh, I wish you had talked to me, to someone."

"I didn't want to talk. Not to anyone, not even my shrink. I sat in his office, totally catatonic, with his meter running at a hundred dollars an hour. I loved that little slut. I won't bore you with all the miseries he inflicted on me, but still I thought I loved him. I didn't want to live without him. After my melodramatic attempt on my life, the good doctor packed me off to a fancy bin. Everyone thought I was in Europe. I spent two months in very luxurious isolation."

"I'm so sorry, Paul."

"Don't be. Not anymore. The reason I'm telling you this dreary tale is that I want you to know I understand. And I want you to know that you'll feel good again. You'll even say, 'What did I ever see in Harry Sherwood?' Promise you'll believe me."

"I believe you."

"No, you don't. I can hear it; your voice is very insincere. All right, missy, if you're going to be a skeptic, I'll show you how sure I am. I'm going to make you a bet. If one year from now, you can't say to me: 'Paul, you were right,' I will give you, with my compliments, one of my very overpriced paintings. Now, do you believe me?"

"I believe you."

"Not like that. Not all passive and fatalistic. These things don't just happen, Kate dear, you have to make them happen. That's what I finally did. I woke up one day in my ermine-lined padded cell and said to myself: 'Paul Harmon, you beautiful genius, what are you doing to yourself? And over a cheap, no-talent hustler, who is, at this moment, probably turning tricks on Sunset Strip.' Well, I can tell you, I got my cute little ass out of there in a hurry. And I got to work. I worked nonstop for months. I was possessed; yes, I can honestly say I was possessed. Everything that was poisoning me inside started to leave me. The critics said that period produced my best work. 'A mature Paul Harmon,' they said, not that those nelly queens know what they're talking about. But they were right for once. It was my best work. And it saved me, Kate dear. It saved me," he finished solemnly, so earnest that Kate smiled.

"So what are you telling me, Paul? That if I get up right now and start to clean up this apartment, I'll start to feel better?"

"Well, perhaps you will, darling, perhaps you will. I had noticed that *chez* Kate is not up to your usual eat-off-the-floor standard. But, no, that's not what I meant. I think you have

to get out of this place. Find yourself a new apartment."

"Harry would agree with you. He says this is too expensive."

"Well, screw Harry. Excuse me, darling, but you need surroundings that are fresh and new, that say 'Kate's place.' I can help if you like. You must have noticed that I have exquisite taste."

"Oh, yes, I have, Paul."

"Stop smiling like that. I know my personal kind of environment wouldn't suit you, but I am an artist, you know."

"I know. And I was smiling because you're such a tonic, Paul. It's impossible to . . . wallow when you're around. I'd appreciate your help, of course. First I have to find something not too expensive. In the neighborhood, if I can, then I won't have to pull the kids out of school."

"Good. That's positive planning. Next we'll have to find you a job. What can you do?"

"Oh, Paul, I don't know. I used to teach, but I don't think I want to do that anymore. Harry says he's willing to pay the bills for a while, so maybe I can get something where I wouldn't have to be out of the house all day long. In a few months, when the kids are . . . adjusted, then maybe I can work longer hours."

"Very sensible, Kate. Well, what else can you do?"

"I can be a wife. I can cook and clean and sew and . . ."

"Enough—enough. I'm sorry, Kate, I'm just not in the market for a wife. Maybe when I'm older. And much tired. I'll shock everyone and announce I've been a closet heterosexual all these years. We can get married in Times Square. I'll get Harry to arrange press coverage. What do you think? Oh, wouldn't that be delicious?" He started to giggle and Kate joined in.

"Oh, Paul, that's wonderful. Now that you've relieved all my worries about a desolate old age, all I have to worry about is right now. So what can I do while you're sowing all your wild oats?"

"Hmm. Well, since you've done all this time in the wife business, maybe you could be someone's mistress for a while. A change of pace, you know? Of course you would have to change your image . . . I have it: the Greek who was in last week. He bought six paintings without even asking the price. My dear, you should have seen the floozy he brought with him—strictly Hoboken waitress—all lacquered hair and chalky orange lipstick. And dumb. You wouldn't believe the inanities

that tumbled from those painted lips. But, my dear, she was bedecked, absolutely bedecked with very pricey baubles. So obviously the man isn't chintzy. Would you like me to introduce you?"

By now Kate was nearly doubled over with laughter. "No thanks, Paul."

"Well, why not, for heaven's sake?"

"I don't think the children would understand."

"Oh, all right, maybe you should wait until they're older before you do that. Well, I don't know what I'm going to do to help you. Wait, wait, I have it. My most brilliant idea yet. I'll fire Harry, and you can do my public relations. Any fool can do that. You must have learned something from old Harry in all the years you lived together."

Kate stopped laughing. "Actually I did. Harry used to bring home his press releases for me to polish. He didn't like to give them to his secretary until they were just right. So I do know a little bit about the business. Maybe I can get a job as somebody's assistant; there are dozens of companies other than Harry's..."

"No, no, I won't hear of that. Do you know what a PR assistant is? A lackey. That would be too ignominious for you, Kate, to be a flunky in Harry's line of work. No, if you're going to be a flunky, let it be something new. Something yours."

She looked at him blankly. She had never thought of anything outside her family as hers.

"All right," he went on. "You say you can write English. That's something. Here's what I'm going to do. When you come to my party, I'm going to introduce you to Rick O'Malley. He's the editor of the *Village Courier*. You've seen it, of course. It's a sweet little paper. And Rick is sweet, too, even if his brains are pickled in alcohol. He's worked on some real papers in his day, so he manages to get the *Courier* out whether he's drunk or sober. I'm going to tell him you need a job. I'm sure he can find something for you to do."

"But why would he do that, Paul? I have no experience. I don't know anything about working on a newspaper, even a small one."

"Because, dear girl, I'm going to ask him. And because," he grinned wickedly, "we're going to lie. We're going to tell him you have lots of experience. I'm going to tell him he's

lucky to have you for the niggardly wages he can afford to pay."

"But, Paul, what if he wants a reference? Where are we going to say I've worked?"

"Oh, ye of little faith, we're going to say that you were a reporter. No, we'll say you did social news—before you were married. That will explain why you're a little rusty. We'll say you worked for the *Newport Sun*, a trivial but altogether respectable paper. In my home town, as it happens."

"But what if he checks?"

"Really, Kate," he said haughtily, "if you're going to be tiresome, I'll just have to give you up. If Rick rouses himself sufficiently to dial the number of the *Newport Sun*, our lie will be substantiated. Because I shall have called the editor of that paper, who happens to adore me, and he will have agreed to say whatever I ask him to say. Now, will you be quiet and just do as you're told?"

Kate was impressed in spite of herself. "Do you think it will work, Paul? Really?"

"Of course, it will work. The *Courier* will be a good place for you to learn a trade. Rick can teach you; he still has a few viable brain cells, not to mention a great deal of experience. Later, you can move on, to *New York Magazine* maybe. Wherever you like. I don't want you to waste your talent forever at a little paper like the *Courier*."

Kate started laughing again. "What talent? Oh, Paul, I haven't even got a job, and already you're promoting me."

He shot her a pitying look. "Where is your ambition, Kate? Your confidence? I know you can be something if you set your mind to it. Why don't you? Do you know how I started out in this cold, cruel city? No? Well, I'm not going to tell you. It's history now. And it's too dreary. I'll only say I did many things that weren't worthy of my genius. But whatever puts your foot on that first rung, Kate, that's what you do. After that, it's all up to you. You decide when you're good enough to move on. And if you believe it, other people will, too."

She shook her head. "All this is too much. We're talking about me, but I can't help feeling like it's someone else. It's all so different from what I've been."

He upended the champagne bottle, pouring the last bit into her glass. "Then years from now, you're going to say: 'I owe everything to my friend Paul Harmon; he was my Pygmalion.'"

He raised his own glass in a toast. "To the new Kate. May she be as nice as the old one, only better."

When they finished their champagne, he looked at his authentic tank watch. "Now that we've settled your future, would you be angry with me if I ran off? I have an assignation with the most adorable creature. Utterly brainless, but so pretty."

"Of course not. I thought you said you had nothing to do?"

He opened his thick-lashed black eyes wide and smiled ingenuously. "I lied."

"Oh, you—you..." She hugged him warmly. "Go on to your assignation."

"Well, then, *À bientôt*. And don't forget my party. I'll be wearing crimson and white, so please color-coordinate."

"I'll try, Paul. And thank you. Really, thank you. For everything. I feel so much better. You're such a good person."

"Don't be sentimental. It's even more *outré* than self-pity."

Paul's visit had made her feel special. Loved and cared for. She knew that her children loved her, but that wasn't the same. Sarah and Josh didn't choose her. They were stuck with her, at least until they were old enough to decide whether or not they liked Kate Sherwood as a person, separate from Kate Sherwood as Mom, the one who prepared meals, wiped noses and chased away nightmares.

Paul was something different. He was beautiful and vivid and very talented. And he had chosen her, over Harry. That must mean that she was special. More special in her way than Harry. And that mattered to her very, very much.

Her Saturday night had been infused with life and energy and positive thoughts for tomorrow. And she was going to a party. Pleasantly drowsy with champagne and anticipation, she prepared to go to bed.

The telephone rang. It was Harry's cousin Bert, a dull man whom Harry had endured once or twice a year, for his parents' sake.

"Kate," he began apologetically, "I'm sorry to bother you at this late hour, but Barbara and I are coming up to New York next week, and I thought we might get together. Could I talk to Harry?"

The request startled her. Apparently Harry had not said anything to his parents about the separation. Or about Laurie. He was embarrassed, she realized, in a sudden flash of understanding. Brash, confident Harry was embarrassed. And,

she concluded, with a quick burst of anger, he was leaving it up to her to deal with. Just as he was leaving all the messy, tiresome funeral arrangements for their marriage up to her. The anger made her mischievous.

"Oh, Bert," she said softly, allowing her voice to crack, "didn't Harry tell you? He's left me. For another woman." She paused to let the announcement sink in, enjoying the confused silence at the other end, glad that she was able to say the words without choking over the pain. "I'll give you his new number. It's..."

Bert took the number and then stumbled over his words of condolence. "I'm so sorry, Kate... if there's anything Barbara and I can do..."

"Thank you, Bert. That's very kind. We'll be all right," she said, trying to sound brave and heartbroken. And when she hung up, she started to laugh, deep and hearty, full-bodied laughter.

There, she thought, that's going to give you a bad moment or two, Harry Sherwood. She was sure that Harry would soon get a phone call from his parents, demanding to know what was going on, what he thought he was doing, leaving his nice wife and two beautiful children. She could almost picture Harry, caught off balance, trying to be smooth and convincing with his parents. Although they didn't see much of each other, she knew Harry liked his mother and father to think he was nothing short of wonderful.

Yes, she thought, it was fun imagining Harry trying to sell his new life to an incredulous audience of two. Not a bad Saturday night. Not bad at all.

## Chapter 4

"REALLY? You went to Paul Harmon's party? As his date?" Margo's blue eyes sparkled, as she sat on the edge of her bed, listening eagerly to Kate's report of her first social evening as a single woman. Wealth and power were no strangers to Margo, but her husband's friends were men of business and industry. She was intrigued by Kate's acquaintance with the world of the arts. "Tell me all about it," she urged. "And don't leave anything out."

"It was crowded," Kate said, "lots of people looking other people over. Paul was certainly something to see. He had on this scarlet space suit, with a silver and white cape. I wore basic black. Paul approved of that, said it was the perfect foil for his ensemble."

"Who was there?"

"Well, the mayor came. Paul is honorary chairman of the latest 'I Love New York' campaign. And I think I saw Bianca Jagger..."

"Ooh, what was she wearing?"

"Something bizarre. I didn't really get a good look..."

"Who else?"

"Some rock musicians...and Liza Minelli came for a while..."

"Did you talk to her?"

"Of course not. What would I say to Liza Minelli? Or to any of those people?"

"You must have talked to somebody." Margo looked disappointed.

"I did. I said 'Hello' to John McEnroe when Paul introduced us. But then I ran out of small talk; I don't know anything about tennis."

"Oh, really, Kate."

"I'm not good in a crowd like that, Margo. It was fun to be there and watch everyone. Paul and I danced a few times; there was a great band, and the food was good. But let's face it, what would I say to an artist or an actor? What would I say when they asked me what I did? I used to say that I was married to Harry Sherwood. Now I don't do anything. Oh, wait, correction. I am going to be doing something. I got a job."

"You did? That's wonderful, Kate. How? What? Tell me."

"Paul introduced me to a friend of his, the editor of the *Village Courier*. He promised me a job. I'm going to see him tomorrow."

"The *Courier*, that's the paper we get in the lobby every week. What are going to do?"

"A little bit of everything, I guess, since I can't do anything in particular."

"I'm impressed, Kate. You're going to be a newspaper-woman."

"Don't be too impressed. I'm only getting a hundred and a quarter a week."

"Good grief! My maid gets more than that."

"Lucky maid. But Paul assures me it's only a matter of time before I earn a living wage. It's something, Margo, a start. I've been totally dependent on Harry since Sarah was born. I never thought about it before, but now I feel as if I've been a glorified charity case."

"Oh, Kate, it's not like that at all. I stopped modeling when I married Mario, and I've never felt like a charity case. I'm a partner. I make a very attractive home for my husband, I've given him a son, and I entertain his clients. In return he's taken care of me—handsomely, I admit, and much better than I could do for myself. But then I like to think that I've helped Mario improve his fortunes, too."

"I'm sure you have, Margo. You do everything with style. And your home is really so beautiful. Speaking of homes, I have to get going now. I have to see three real estate agents before the children come home from school."

After Kate left, Margo called Thelma to take away the coffee service. She looked around with some satisfaction at the sprawling eight-room apartment she called home. She had furnished each of those rooms with the same meticulous attention to detail that she had always given her face and body. Now she was

always surrounded by beauty and the kind of luxury she had never known when she was modeling.

Margo had never quite reached the top of her profession and had never quite earned the stratospheric fees commanded by the fortunate few in her business. Orphaned at seventeen, Margo had gone straight from high school into showroom modeling, then had moved into the better-paying and more prestigious photographic work. With her limited education, Margo had always been grateful for the face and body that had saved her from some dreary clerical job.

Modeling had given her poise and confidence, had taught her discipline and had built up her physical stamina. It had taught her how to flirt with the camera and to apply that same skill to the men she met. But it had been hard, grinding work, a constant struggle against nature and the calendar.

When she met Mario, she was more than ready to give up the "glamour," the perpetual dieting, the constant concern over laugh lines and puffy eyes: the dread of what she would do when the camera no longer looked at her with love.

Watching her new friend's struggle to make a life on her own, Margo was even more grateful for what she had. While Kate would be working in some little office for what she usually spent on a pair of shoes, Margo could shop, lunch at Lutèce, have her hair done, her body massaged, her face anointed with soothing creams and oils and her nails perfectly lacquered. Mario never looked at the bills she ran up. He paid them routinely and without comment, just as he paid the maintenance on their apartment, the maid's salary and the charge accounts she maintained all over the city. He indulged her generously, and for that she gave him respect, affection and gratitude.

Yet hers was more than a marriage of convenience. Margo loved her husband, deeply and passionately. And if she rarely indulged her desire to smother him with messy hugs and sloppy spontaneous kisses, it was not because she didn't want to. It was because Mario's cool, controlled demeanor did not invite emotional displays, excesses of any kind. Only when Mario visited her bed—they occupied separate bedrooms, European-style—did Margo feel free to show her love, freely and without inhibition.

Whatever adjustments she'd had to make in her own personality, Margo felt she had a solid, fortunate marriage. She wished Kate could find someone soon. Then she wouldn't have to worry about so many things alone. She wouldn't have to

give up the kind of life she'd had with Harry, wouldn't have to struggle to raise her children.

Perhaps Mario had a single friend somewhere, she thought, someone who could appreciate a nice woman, who didn't require too much glamour and sophistication. She reminded herself to ask him, when he came home. Whenever that might be. She sighed. Sometimes it was difficult to plan a civilized dinner, if you didn't really know when it would be eaten. Or if, in fact, it would be eaten at all.

## Chapter 5

KATE didn't know what she'd expected of a newspaper office, but she found the *Courier's* quarters unprepossessing, to say the least. The neighborhood newspaper was located on the ground floor of a commercial loft building. The front reception desk was occupied by a plump elderly woman who looked as if she came with the building.

The furnishings consisted of a dozen old-fashioned and very battered desks, scattered throughout the single barnlike room, which had been painted, at least ten or fifteen years before, a dull barracks-green. Automation clearly had not come to the *Courier*, for all of the vintage upright typewriters in sight belonged to some pre-electric era. Kate felt a little overdressed in the tailored suit she'd chosen for her first day of work. A pair of coveralls would have been more appropriate, she thought, since nothing in the place looked like it had been cleaned or dusted recently.

Still, it was a newspaper, and Kate felt a little quickening in her pulse as she made her way through the maze of desks and clutter. Rick O'Malley was sitting at a large desk in the far corner, a phone receiver held between his shoulder and his ear, typing remarkably fast with two fingers, a cigarette dangling between his lips, spilling ashes down his already smudged shirt front. She waited until he hung up the telephone.

"Mr. O'Malley," she said timidly, "I'm Kate Sherwood, remember? You said I should come in today . . . to start work?"

"Ah, yes, Kate, of course I remember, a pretty girl like you. Welcome to the *Courier*. And call me Rick; I don't answer to anything else." He smiled broadly and pumped her fingers in a hearty handshake. "Well, Kate, as you can see there are not many of us here, serving the cause of neighborhood journalism." He waved a beefy arm to take in the old woman, two

teenagers and one young man. "The advertising department—that's Mary Sullivan and one part-timer—they're out peddling space. We have a few regular free-lancers, but what you see is our regular staff. That means each of us has to be a jack-of-all-trades. Do you comprehend what that means, Kate?"

She nodded and he continued. "Each of us has to be his own researcher, his own clerk, secretary and janitor. Don't look so worried; I'm sure you'll get on just fine. I'm going to start you on listings. 'Tis a boring job, but someone has to do it, and *someone* is usually the lad or lady with the least seniority. That's you. Now take these," he handed her a thick pile of press releases, "and arrange them alphabetically, each in its proper category, you know, theater, films, music and so on. Then make up a small announcerment for each. Copy the format from last week's paper. If you have any questions, don't be afraid to ask. I don't bite, no matter what Paul might have told you. When you're finished, just holler, there's plenty more for you to do."

Kate settled herself at one of the empty desks, making a mental note to bring a dust rag and some Pledge tomorrow, to make at least one corner of the *Courier* grime- and dust-free. For the next two hours she condensed long-winded descriptions of plays, movies, concerts and other Village events into brief three-line précis of salient facts: locations, playing times, prices and so on, and then arranged them in alphabetical order. It was a mechanical job, but she found she was enjoying it enormously.

"And how are you finding your first day with us, Kate?" She looked up to see Rick standing over her, a cracked mug of steaming coffee in his hand.

"It's very nice. Is there something else you want me to do?"

"Yes, indeed. You can take your first coffee break. I made it myself, in your honor. But from now on, this is part of your job, too. Just about this time of day, m'dear. Another of the pleasures of being the new kid on the block. When you've finished the listings, I want you to bring the back-issue file up-to-date. It hasn't been done for at least a year, maybe two or three; I can't remember. It's important, even for a paper the size of this one, to have a decent reference file. In the back room, you'll find some piles of newspapers. Just go through them, take two of each issue, and file them according to date in the big wooden cabinets against the wall. Can you manage that?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure I can."

"Good for you. That should take you through the end of the day. Paul mentioned that you couldn't stay too late because you have children in school. No, don't apologize, I'm more than willing to be flexible."

"Thank you, Rick. I appreciate that. I'll try to give you a full day's work anyway. Maybe there are things I can take home with me, bring them back the next day. Maybe..."

"That's the spirit, Kate. I don't think we're going to have any problems at all. And just to show you how much confidence I have in our new association, I'll tell you an idea I had after Paul first mentioned your name to me. I've been thinking for some time about running a neighborhood gossip column. Not Liz Smith, mind you. Village things, like so-and-so graduated from law school or had twins or finished restoring a brownstone. You know, nice warm little tidbits about the people who read our paper. When Paul told me you'd done social news, I decided to go ahead and give it a try. So think about it, and after you've settled in, we can get started, okay?"

"Okay," she said, hesitantly, trying not to panic at the thought of actually having to write something on her own. "But where am I supposed to get all this stuff for the column? Go door-to-door?" She regretted the question the moment she asked it. This was the sort of thing an experienced reporter, like she was supposed to be, would know.

Rick didn't seem to notice. "Nah, I'll start running a box announcing the column and asking for news. You'll get plenty. This is a tight little neighborhood, a very small town, not like the rest of the city. When you get something special, like a fiftieth anniversary, you can follow up with a call. Get a nice quote. You can also call the press agents who handle the off-Broadway shows down here. Tell them you'll print anything interesting about Village shows or Village actors. Call the book publishers. Tell their publicity people the same thing. We have a lot of authors living in this neighborhood, so that should give you some material. I'll talk to the free-lancers who do our reviews, and I'll tell them to pass on any little bits and pieces they have on to you. Don't worry. After a few weeks, the only problem you'll have is deciding what you want to use. In the meantime, think about developing a nice light style, but no hard edges. No sarcasm, no bitchiness. We're not the *Village Voice*, okay?"

"Okay," she said, making another mental note, to buy every

publication that carried a gossip column and to study them word by word.

With the promise of a real writing assignment ahead of her, Kate attacked the dusty, dirty piles of newspapers in the back room. She worked quickly, with enthusiasm. One day on the job, and she was going to have her own column. Something that hundreds of people, maybe even thousands would read. Paul was right. This was a beginning. She'd never dreamed she'd be doing anything like this, enjoying anything outside her own home so much—even shoveling through piles of dirty old newspapers. Tonight she would call Paul and thank him again. He was right about Rick, too. The big strapping Irishman with the florid complexion and the watery eyes *was* sweet, and he did seem willing to teach her.

When she put away the last of the back issues, she went into the paper's single bathroom and washed her hands in the dirt-encrusted sink. She looked at herself in the cloudy mirror. She was flushed and sweaty, a smudge of newsprint on her cheek. But there was a glint in her eyes, a sparkle and a purpose, a pugnacious tilt to her nose. Today she looked feisty, a fighter. Not a heavyweight, but at the very least a determined up-and-coming bantamweight. Yes, she thought, this Kate was much better to look at, much better to be with than the sad sack that had stared back at her after Harry left. Much, much better.

When she had finished her quick clean-up, Rick was waiting for her outside. "Listen, Kate," he said, "don't think I'm trying to be a busybody, but Paul also told me you needed a place to live. I thought I'd remind you to check our rental ads as they come in. Get a jump on the general public, y'know."

"Thank you, Rick, that's a great idea. I'll do that. Thanks for everything. I think I'm going to like it here."

"Don't mention it. And if you ever need a half-hour or so to nip out and look at something, just let me know. If you make good coffee, I won't dock you."

Kate wondered exactly what Paul had told Rick about her. This new boss was being so kind. Maybe Paul had described her as one of New York's needy and destitute. Whatever he'd said, she was grateful. She had finished her first day of work dusty and tired, but very lighthearted.

Kate marched jauntily into the *Courier's* run-down office, thinking how good it looked to her now—almost a home away from home. She had cleaned her desk and decorated it with

pictures of the children and a few favorite knickknacks. She loved the work she was doing, even making the coffee. Rick had assured her that a new intern from the NYU journalism school would be arriving soon, to take over the scut work that was hers.

The column was going very well. She had more than enough material coming in regularly, perhaps because she had the patience to cultivate contacts and listen to long, rambling narratives that yielded a two- or three-line item. She loved every minute of it.

"Kate, m'dear, do you have a minute?" Rick asked, as she dropped her lunch bag on her desk.

"Sure, what's up?" She walked over to his desk.

"Look, Kate, you're doing a good job for us—you know that—and I wish I could pay you more. But you know I run this paper on wit and cunning and not much else. I've been trying to think of a way you could pick up a few extra bucks. I think I have something. You know we use free-lancers for the arts section. I could throw you a book review, a theater review or a movie screening every now and then. We pay twenty-five bucks a piece, not a princely sum, I grant you. But I'd like to see you have it."

"Oh, Rick, that's so nice." What Rick was suggesting seemed very glamorous and a little beyond her. "But," she protested, "I don't have any qualifications for doing reviews. Or any experience..."

He looked at her with amusement. "Ah, Kate, what sort of qualifications do you think any of our people have? Really, darlin', our principal theater reviewer is a schoolteacher. The movie reviewer is a senior at NYU and the book reviewers, well, the less said about them the better. You're an educated woman, Kate. You have taste, you write literate English, that alone is a great improvement over what I usually see. All you need is a little confidence in your own judgment. Try it, Kate, you might have some fun—and you can take your kids to some freebies."

"Well," she said, still doubtful, "I don't know if I can do it, but it would be nice. We don't have much to spend for entertainment..."

"Good. Then it's settled. Here," he said, "start with this. It's a new Walt Disney movie. And here's an off-Broadway show that the regular reviewer couldn't cover, and this book—the author lives on Barrow Street—if you like the book, maybe

you can call the man and do a short profile we can run with it . . .”

“Whoa,” Kate laughed. “No more, Rick, no more. Let me see how I make out with this stuff. You might change your mind.”

“Nah, go on now, before you start telling me how incompetent you are.”

“You’re right. I’m going to do a great job. And thanks.” Kate left Rick’s desk feeling like she’d been given an unexpected Christmas present. She, Kate Sherwood, was going to write some real articles. To give her opinions. To attend plays and movies free, by invitation. To be paid for it. For the first time, she really understood the kind of pleasure Harry had always taken in his work, the kind of satisfaction that didn’t come from just receiving a paycheck. This new feeling surprised her. She began to suspect that she had always been devoid of ambition simply because she didn’t know any better.

She couldn’t wait to tell Margo about her latest assignments. Maybe she could invite her to the off-Broadway play. She could never really repay Margo for her kindness and support when she desperately needed them, but maybe she could share with her some of the perks that seemed to be part of this job.

But first she’d have to report to Paul on this latest advance in what he liked to call her career. She dialed his number and a mechanical voice answered: “You have reached the home of Paul Harmon, artist extraordinaire. Mr. Harmon cannot take your call at the moment, but if you will leave your name and number, he will attend to you, all in good time.”

“Paul?” she asked. “Is that you? Pretending to be a machine?”

He laughed. “Kate, love, you caught me out.”

“Silly, you’re too real to sound like a machine. And what were you doing it for anyway?”

“I don’t know. Just a whim. How goes it with you?”

“It goes fine, Paul. Your friend Rick just gave me some real writing assignments. I’m going to do two reviews: a movie and a play. Off-Broadway, but still, a play.”

“Congratulations. It’s about time he recognized your talent.”

“What talent, Paul? I’ve only been there a month, and Rick’s been very patient, really . . .”

“Undeveloped talent, Kate, that’s the best kind. All your possibilities are ahead of you.”

“Right now, all I can do is take your word for it. And I’ll

send you a copy of my first official pieces in print."

"Well, I should hope so. As your sponsor I expect to see everything you do from now on. And speaking of *from now on*, how is the rest of your life?"

"Oh, I don't know, as well as can be expected."

"That's not an answer; that's a hospital report."

"All right. I'm managing. And when I stand still long enough to think about it, I'm scared and I'm lonely. If I could afford it, I'd ask you for the number of your shrink."

"Are you serious?"

"Half and half."

"Kate, dear, listen to me—you don't need your brains rearranged. All you need is a crash course in survival. I think you should try a women's group. One of my models used to go to one in the Village, and she just got married," he finished triumphantly.

"Oh, Paul, I don't know... I don't know if I can talk about... personal things in front of strangers."

"You'd be surprised, Kate. Talking about yourself is a little like sex. Sometimes it's easier with strangers. In any case, you won't be strangers for long. Try it, Kate. What have you got to lose? It's not very expensive. I'll get you the number of the therapist who runs the group."

"All right, Paul. I'll try it. And thanks for caring."

"There she goes again. Thank you for noticing. At the sound of the beep, Paul Harmon is signing off. Beep."

## Chapter 6

As Kate took her seat, she felt like a child in a new school. She told herself there was nothing to be nervous about, that everyone who came here had problems and concerns like her own.

The room was part of a church complex. It was large enough to accommodate groups of people, yet small enough to be warm and inviting. The walls were painted a creamy yellow and covered with art work created by the pupils of the church's lower school. A cluster of folding chairs had been set up. To one side there was a small table, holding a coffee urn, cups, plates and cookies.

As the women started to arrive, Kate thought they looked as nervous as she felt, and that made her feel better. She smiled tentatively as she caught the therapist's eye. Dr. Myra Hatfield was a tall, handsome redhead, about forty-five years old. She wore a green silk blouse and matching skirt, clothes that were tailored, but not severe. There were encouraging crinkles around her eyes, laugh lines around her mouth and a quality of quiet authority about her.

She sat next to Kate and squeezed her hand, as if she understood her apprehension. "Good evening," she said in a pleasant, well-modulated voice. "This is a new group, so we'll all be starting from the same place. I'm going to ask you each to introduce yourself and tell us why you're here. Kate, will you start?"

Kate took a deep breath and began: "My name is Kate Sherwood. I'm thirty-six years old. I have two children, Sarah and Josh. I was married for thirteen years. My husband recently left me." Her last words hung in the air, defining her condition.

"Lucky you!" The response came from a small, intense-

looking woman with an olive complexion and an enormous crown of black frizzed hair. She was wearing khaki fatigues and no makeup, except for charcoal shadow smudged around her enormous black eyes. Her words lightened the atmosphere and everyone laughed.

"Well," Dr. Hatfield said, "as you can see, Kate, one woman's misfortune is another woman's mitzvah, if you'll excuse the Yiddish homily. Since we've already heard from you, Ellen, maybe you'll finish your introduction."

"I'm Ellen Hirschorn," the dark-haired woman said. "I'm an actress; I've done a little directing, but mainly I'm an acting teacher because I like to eat regularly and because I have a husband—I wish he would leave me—to support."

"I'm Janine Hollister," volunteered a plain, gray-haired woman in her mid-fifties. Her voice was soft, her manner diffident, almost apologetic. Her dress, a shapeless gray crepe of indeterminate vintage, hung loosely on a body that appeared to be slender and well-proportioned. "I've lived in this neighborhood all my life," she continued. "I belong to this church. My husband died six months ago, and now . . . now"—her voice cracked—"my life is so empty. My children are grown-up. Our friends . . . they were kind at first, but now . . . now they seem so distant. Robert—my husband—and I, we had such a good life together, but now it feels like nothing is left. Nothing at all . . ." she trailed off, almost in a whisper.

Kate was moved by this recital. She, too, had seen what seemed to be a satisfying life suddenly vanish. But she was much younger than Janine Hollister, young enough to imagine that she might rebuild. She had her children, some friends . . .

"I'm Wendy Garber," said a young woman wearing full makeup, expensive designer clothes and an equally expensive hairdo, in a shade of blonde that could only be achieved with serious expenditure of time and money. She had a natural frosty kind of beauty, almost a Grace Kelly quality, but the style of adornment she had chosen for herself seemed to detract from her beauty rather than to enhance it. There was a tight set to her full mouth, a hardness around the eyes, a suggestion that time had not been kind to Wendy Garber. "I work for an advertising agency," she said. "I'm in love with a married man, but I think it's only a matter of time before he leaves his wife."

Kate was fascinated and repelled. Here was the enemy in the flesh, the kind of woman who took up with other women's

husbands, who could talk so calmly about bringing pain and misfortune to another woman, as if the wife were just a technical inconvenience and not human at all. Kate took an instant dislike to Wendy, but she was curious to hear the woman's story, curious to know the other woman's thinking, her *modus operandi*.

"I'm Rose Mancini," a pale brunette said in a tired voice. "I've been married for fifteen years. We wanted children for so long, John and I, but we didn't have any. I got pregnant five years ago. We were in seventh heaven. Our baby, Joey, he was so beautiful when he was born. Like an angel," she sighed, taking a gulp of air before she continued. "Then we found out that Joey wasn't . . . right. We went to so many doctors, but they all said the same thing. Joey's never going to grow up, not in his mind. I still love him—he's my baby. But John, he can't seem to forgive Joey for not being perfect. He wants to put Joey away . . . in one of those places. He says we can't have a normal life with Joey in the house. He's been talking about a divorce if I don't see things his way. I just don't know what to do . . ." she finished wearily.

Kate's heart went out to this woman. She silently thanked the divine providence that had given her two healthy, normal children. Suddenly her problems seemed almost trivial, compared with Rose's tragedy. Her problems were, after all, manageable, but Rose's heartache could only be endured.

"So," Myra Hatfield interjected, "now we all know a little something about one another, about why we're all here together. In the weeks to come, we'll try to sift through the problems and to move a little farther along in the directions we want to take. Do you have a question, Janine? You look a little doubtful."

"What if you don't know anything about a direction? What if you just feel lost?" Janine asked.

"We all feel that way sometimes," Dr. Hatfield answered. "That's usually a signal that we need time, time to regroup, to rest, perhaps to recover from some shock or trauma or loss, as in your case. As we begin to heal, then we begin to think about what we want to do next."

"But how long does it take?" Janine asked. "I feel like I haven't even been living since my husband died. I feel like I died, too. I get up in the morning and I don't feel anything at all. I make coffee and toast, but I'm not hungry. I wash and

get dressed, but I don't really care how I look. All day long I just go through the motions. I can't go on like this. How long does it go on?"

"It takes as long as it takes," said Dr. Hatfield. "The fact that you're here means that you're ready to think about coming alive again. Feeling it may take a little longer."

"I know exactly what I want," Wendy said. "I think it and I feel it. I want to get married and have a family. I'm going to be thirty on my next birthday, and I'm tired of waiting. So how do I get a man who says he loves me to make a commitment?"

Kate felt like saying something rude to Wendy, but she restrained herself. They weren't here to judge one another. At least she didn't think that's what they were there for. Better keep quiet, she thought, until you understand the ground rules a little better.

"Let me ask you something," Ellen said, "and stop me if this is a dumb question. But if you're so hot to get married, how come you're hitting on a man who's not exactly available?"

"It is a dumb question," Wendy snapped. "If you were single, you wouldn't ask it. The singles scene in this city is like a meat grinder, and we're the meat. You think I haven't tried? You spend a weekend in a guy's apartment, and he doesn't even remember your name, let alone your phone number. They use you and then they forget you," she said vehemently. "And then I caught on. It's easier to get a married man's attention. They're not in such a hurry to move on. They take the time to know you. They appreciate what you have to offer. They treat you better and . . ."

"Wait a minute," Ellen interrupted, "are you saying that you've been involved with married men before?"

"Yes, I have," Wendy answered defiantly. "So what?"

"So nothing, I'm not picking on you, kid. But you're still single. And if you're worried about being used and dropped, what makes married men so pure? So they treat you better and they appreciate what they get from you. That's okay if appreciation is all you're after. But it isn't, and I'm back to my original question. What makes you think you can get a married man to leave his wife for you?"

"If I knew that I wouldn't be here. And if you're so smart, why don't you just leave your husband and do what you want to do? What's stopping you?"

"I don't know," Ellen said quietly. "I guess that's why I'm here."

"Was there anything in particular," Myra Hatfield broke in, "was there any change in your marriage that brought you to this juncture?"

"No," Ellen answered, "that's the same. It never changes. But there was something. I've been working with a student of mine, a young kid. She's talented, but not great, at least not yet. We spent a few weeks working on an audition piece she wanted to do for the Actors Studio. A two-character scene, it was. Anyway, the day of the audition rolled around. We did the piece, it went well, and I was pretty sure she'd get in. But after it was all over, this director, a man I really respect, took me aside and said: 'Ellen, the girl's good, but you have a gift. You made that scene come alive, and I hope you're using that gift in a way that gives you pleasure and fulfillment.' You know what I did after that? I went home and cried. Cried! That's not my style and it never has been. So I figured I'd better get my act together. I'm not getting any younger either. So if anybody wants to tell me how I screwed my life up, I'm listening."

"I don't think that's why we're here," Myra said gently. "Getting your life unscrewed up would be more to the point, wouldn't it?"

There was a light ripple of laughter, warm and companionable, and in it a budding sense of camaraderie. Kate was glad to be there.

She listened to the others speak, and the time went quickly. Though she didn't contribute anything during the session, she found that she had lost her self-consciousness as the other women became more real to her. Everyone in the group was troubled in some way. It was nothing to be ashamed of, she decided.

Myra Hatfield was empathetic, incisive, and to Kate's relief, eminently practical. She did not indulge in abstract theories and analyses. She was concerned with problem-solving, not with dream interpretations or childhood repressions, but with the tangible realities of the here-and-now.

When Dr. Hatfield announced that their time was up, Kate realized that she wasn't going to find any magical formula here. But she felt less alone. Shared burdens were somehow a little lighter. Margo had been a great comfort to her. But Margo

seemed to have everything under control. The women in her group did not.

Her apartment was quiet when she returned home. "Everything all right?" she asked the sitter.

"Well . . ." the girl hesitated. "Josh cried after you left. He kept saying something about your not coming back. I promised him you'd be home by ten o'clock, and that you'd wake him up when you got home. I hope that was all right?"

"That was perfect, Cynthia. Thanks."

After the sitter left, Kate went into the children's bedroom. She kissed Josh on the forehead and whispered: "Josh, love, wake up. Mommy's home."

He opened his eyes, smiled sleepily and wound his arms around her neck. She stretched out in his bed, beside him, until he fell asleep. For the first time, Josh's insecurity did not depress or intimidate her. What he was feeling was healthy and normal, she realized. And in time, he would know that his mother was not going to abandon him.

Just as she was going to know all kinds of new things that would help her live this new life they were making. She was going to rediscover Kate, to know what she was capable of and what she could aspire to. She was going to be a friend to herself, just as those books of hers urged. A friend to her children and to the people she cared about.

There were fewer people in her life now, and maybe that was a good thing. As she looked back on the people she and Harry had entertained when they were together, it seemed as if they didn't have much real meaning. They were part of a circle, like the furniture, accessories to a life-style. And having them around had diverted her from making real friends, people whose lives intertwined with hers, who were vital and important.

Now she had Margo. And Paul. Her children. Rick O'Malley. And the women in her group—they weren't friends, not yet, but they were companions along this new road she was traveling.

## Chapter 7

KATE stared disconsolately at the pile of classified ads on the kitchen table. She'd gone through the *Times*, the *Village Voice* and even the *Courier*, circling apartment ads that seemed *probable, possible, or last resort*. In review, none of them were really very hopeful. Nothing she could even describe as *promising*. But she knew the time had come when she'd have to make a choice from what was available.

Her last discussion with Harry (it was a quarrel actually, but he made a point of referring to all their talks, cordial or otherwise, as discussions) had focused on the issue of a new place to live. He had informed her how much money he would give her and hinted rather broadly that he expected to reduce this by degrees as soon as she could increase her earning power.

As she figured out a budget whereby she and the children could get by, she realized that their rent would have to be roughly a quarter of what she and Harry had spent on their lovely townhouse flat.

Armed with her meager leads, she began to comb the neighborhood, conjuring up fantasies of one of those fabled rent-controlled or rent-stabilized apartments that gave you a decent place to live without putting a lien on your entire financial life. She talked to building supers, to doormen, hinting that she would pay a substantial finder's fee for the right place, but no one seemed to care.

She dropped her expectations and fanned out even farther. Her only requirement was a place that was safe, so that she wouldn't have to worry about the children when she wasn't home. This eliminated all the colorful, but doubtful neighborhoods that were being gentrified, but where you still needed to bar your windows and police-lock your door.

She worked her way south toward Little Italy, where the rents were a little lower, but where they would still be within walking distance of familiar surroundings. She wanted to avoid giving the children a sense of dislocation, but clearly some was going to be inevitable.

Most of the rentals she saw were in tenement buildings, which had sheltered the first waves of Italian immigrants. They offered railroad rooms, arranged unimaginatively like box-cars, strung along narrow, dingy hallways, old-fashioned bathrooms, unpretentious kitchens, not much light and no particular charm. On the plus side, the individual boxy rooms afforded a bit of privacy. And this was a place that still had a sense of neighborhood, a place where you could get to know the grocers and butchers and bakers vending wonderful things to eat.

She had just about decided on a five-room walkup on Sullivan Street, which straddled both the Village and Little Italy. The building was clean and well-kept, and the superintendent was the head of an Italian family that included a couple of teenage girls. Ready baby-sitters, when she could afford it, she thought.

But first she thought she'd better call Harry. Habit and insecurity made her ask him if he wanted to look at the place. He grudgingly agreed to take an hour off and meet her there.

Once again, it seemed she made the wrong decision. With his first look at her potential home, Harry exploded with indignation. "For God's sake, Kate, you're not serious about putting the kids in this dump! What on earth are you thinking?"

She tried not to panic at the edge in his voice. "It's all we can afford if we're going to stay near the old neighborhood. I didn't want to make too many changes at once." She thought she sounded reasonable as she said this.

"Are you trying to make me feel guilty because I can't give you more money?"

"No, I'm not. I'm just saying that I've looked around and this is the best I can find. This city's expensive."

"Then maybe you should think about moving out of the city. With what I give you, you can rent a nice house in New Jersey. Give the kids a nice backyard. Some fresh air. You used to talk about that all the time, remember?"

Kate felt as if she could choke on that memory, on the bitter irony that Harry should now conjure up her own dead fantasies to use for his convenience. Now, when a move to another state would mean a severe dislocation for the children, who had

become city kids, through and through. She could not speak, and he took her silence for possible acquiescence.

"It would be hard for me," he lied, and she knew he was lying. "It wouldn't be so convenient. I'd have to drive out to pick them up. But I'm willing to do it, if it means you can all have a decent place to live. Something better than this," he waved an arm at some cracked plaster.

As calmly as she could, she said: "I don't think New Jersey is the solution for us, Harry. I think we'll just have to make do here. Until I can do better. Then we'll see."

He looked as if he might press the argument. Then he looked at her face and shrugged. "Suit yourself, if this is okay with you. And if the kids don't mind—well, it's okay with me."

Yet after he left, she thought again of the picture he had painted, and she almost hated him for throwing it out as an alternative. The little suburban house. Colonial kitchen and Formica counters. Grass and flowers. She could almost see it in her mind's eye, all part of a dream that had altered and finally disappeared.

Was she being selfish in rejecting it now? She had no illusions about Harry's motives in suggesting it. He might have been genuinely distressed at the thought of his children and their mother living in this tenement. But the newborn cynic in her said it was for him, too. His ex-family, safely tucked away in some suburb, would be less likely to disrupt his new life with crises that didn't warrant his attention. For him, New Jersey wasn't much more inconvenient than driving downtown in heavy traffic. No, Harry wasn't being all that considerate. But did she have the right to reject it?

Her dream had been to be part of a couple-oriented society. The whole package. Little League and car pools. By herself she'd be as welcome in a suburban community as a case of herpes. And probably just as desirable. And where on earth could she find a job like the one she had at the *Courier*? It didn't pay much, but as Paul had pointed out, it was a way of getting a toehold on an interesting new career. And if she was going to go through life without the benefits of marriage, she might as well have a social life that was a little livelier than what she'd find in a suburban town.

She gave the super a check for the security and the first month's rent. And then she had a rush of panic. She needed someone to tell her she had done the right thing. Not Margo. She'd probably faint if she got a look at the place in its present

condition. Paul, she thought. Paul would come to the rescue.

And he did, bearing his favorite offering, a bottle of champagne. She kissed him warmly and pulled him through each of the five rooms.

"Tell me what you think," she pleaded. "Harry thinks I should go to New Jersey and give the kids a better house and fresh air. Am I crazy to take this instead? It's not very pretty, but I think we can be okay. Be honest, Paul. Is it too awful? Harry said..."

"Harry is a horse's ass. I told you that before. Why do you keep making me repeat it?" he said impatiently. "Nobody moves to New Jersey. Only people who are born there live there. Now let me look. Hmm. It has a certain *je ne sais quoi*—it reminds me of a place I once stayed in. Paris, I think. Look here," he pointed to the long narrow hallways that ran the length of the whole apartment. The place's worst feature, she thought. "Perfect. Yes, it's perfect. Now let me tell you what I'm going to do. Just for you. I'm going to make you a gift. A Paul Harmon original. Just for this wall. Oh, Kate, you'll be famous. I'm going to call Liz Smith and tell her. My first painting done for a particular wall, for my good and dear friend, Kate Sherwood, the eminent journalist, on the occasion of her move to a charming maisonette." He waved his arm to take in the same cracked plaster that Harry had criticized a short time before.

Kate felt better. She knew Paul wanted to cheer her up, and she loved him for doing it. "Thanks, Paul. I shouldn't let you do it, but I think this apartment can use something classy."

"Of course. And just wait until you see what else I have in mind. Put yourself in my hands, as you have done with such fine results before."

And she did. To a point. She vetoed white lacquered floors as being a shade too impractical. But she had to admit that Paul was right about the herringbone paper for the bathroom, which covered all the awful cracks she had thought were hopeless. And he was also right about using bright primary colors for the kitchen. It gave the room a certain helter-skelter cheer. His mural was also a smashing success. It was so arresting, so vivid, transforming a dingy, narrow hallway into an instant gallery. The painting established at once that the apartment of Kate Sherwood and children was something special. And she began to think that she had done something right, something on her own.

## Chapter 8

ELLEN Hirschorn let herself into the Soho loft she had shared with her husband since their marriage. She tiptoed up the stairs to the balcony-bedroom where she had been sleeping alone for . . . how many years? She picked up the bedside phone and checked her service for messages. Nothing.

She went back downstairs and contemplated Noah, who looked a little like a beached whale, as he snored heavily on the overstuffed couch they had found on a street corner. His shirt was stretched precariously over his generous paunch. Half the buttons had surrendered to the strain, and those remaining were barely holding against the pressure of his heavy breathing.

Trade papers were scattered on the floor, various items circled in red. Ellen shook her head, not as indulgently as she once had done. Always checking possibilities. What a living folly she had married. And still she could not hate him, no matter what the mistake had cost her. Always the big deal around the corner. Always the rainbow that eluded him. Sometimes she was touched by Noah's constancy. He would never give up. He would be eighty years old, down to his last subway token, and he would still believe he had a chance. She envied him that. And she could not bear to hurt him.

He was selfish, that was true. But there was an innocence about his selfishness, as if it had never occurred to him that he should not have what he wanted and deserved.

Strange how she had once thought he was so worldly and sophisticated—how many lifetimes ago? When she was a star-struck kid from Brooklyn, attending the High School of Performing Arts. Making regular forays into the theater district to stare at actors who came out of stage doors.

She had always known what she wanted. To be a part of

the world of make-believe. Theater. Movies. Maybe even television. She would be an actress. She just knew it.

She had met Noah when she was a senior, selling ads for her yearbook. He was producing a small off-off-Broadway revue at the time, a show that had enjoyed decent reviews and a fairly long run. When he invited her to see the show and join him for dinner, she had been enchanted. She was still enchanted when she married him, six months later.

At first, Noah seemed like the perfect man with which to share her dreams. He had introduced her to a well-known acting teacher, who agreed to take Ellen on as a student. And then he had introduced her to a well-known restaurateur, who had agreed to give Ellen a job as a waitress, so that she might pay for the acting lessons and put a little food on the table, while Noah looked around for his next big deal.

For Ellen, the enchantment ended when Noah had finished teaching her all he knew about show business, which turned out to be not very much. He had helped her get an agent, who helped her get a few small jobs. And Ellen continued to support the Hirschorn household, first as a waitress, then later as assistant to the well-known acting teacher, who discovered that her pupil had a natural capacity for teaching.

It was her skill as a teacher that ultimately raised the Hirschorn standard of living, that put a few amenities, a few sticks of furniture into the barren loft that Noah had occupied during his bachelor days. It was these skills that also afforded Noah the freedom to avoid any kind of job that would bring in any kind of money.

"What else can I do?" he had thrown up his hands and entreated once, when she suggested he might make a financial contribution to their joint well-being. "I'm a producer. I don't know anything else."

It wasn't his fault, she had reasoned then, at a time when she might have gotten out, at a time when their living pattern hadn't quite congealed. And maybe that had been her second big mistake—after the first big one, of marrying him in the first place.

It seemed as if the more hard time she put in with Noah, the more she became enmeshed, involved, entangled in his pattern of failure. And the more responsible she came to feel for his well-being. He had no one else. Nothing else.

Once, she couldn't remember exactly when, she had said to herself that she might leave when they got on their feet

financially. If she knew that Noah could be sure of where his next meal was coming from, it might be easier to think of what she wanted, to reach for it.

And life did get a little better, financially at least, no thanks to Noah. Ellen was good at what she did. When she began private coaching, her reputation built steadily and so did her roster of students. Here and there, she picked up a commercial job, an occasional part in a showcase or an off-Broadway show. As her students went on to make their own careers, in the theater and in films, Ellen's personal network of connections grew. She worked on several movies as dialogue coach and once, in a small but well-received film, as assistant director.

Money came in, bills got paid, but Ellen felt hungrier and hungrier with each passing year. Noah had his schemes, schemes which inevitably diminished their bank balance and Ellen's reservoir of hope. She worked regularly, but there were days she felt as if she had nothing, nothing but her dreams of a career, a real one, instead of the accidental one she had.

And she had yet another dream, a dream she shared with no one, more distant, yet more compelling than the life she lived. A dream of Rod Chapman, the only man she had ever loved.

Millions of American women loved Rod, his face, his presence, the characters he played on the screen. But Ellen knew Rod Chapman the man and loved him as no other woman had, not even the woman he had married. They had touched one another, she and Rod, years ago. And they had forged a connection that had remained true, though he lived on one coast, she on another, though months would go by and she would not hear his voice, though years would go by and she would not see him.

How had she managed to put such distance between herself and everything she had ever wanted? She asked herself that question almost every day of her life, and she had no answers. But when she asked herself how she could begin to close that distance, the first step always had to do with Noah. Walk away. But she didn't know how to do that.

It wasn't Noah's fault, she reasoned now, that he was a man of limited vision and slender intelligence, a man of no great charm who perversely alienated the very people who might do him some good. Even now, when she knew that Noah Hirschorn was a living joke to many people in the business, she couldn't bring herself to hate him.

He hadn't changed. He hadn't done anything in particular to deserve her rejection. She had changed. She had passed him by. She had possibilities she believed in, the chance to fly, if only she weren't shackled to a man who was earthbound.

She knew people walked away from commitments. But she wasn't that kind of person. Her parents had stopped talking years ago, but they were still together. She wondered if either of them had ever hungered for the kind of freedom she craved now.

She'd seen several of her pupils go on to make names for themselves, and she had envied them. They weren't any better than Ellen Hirschorn. She knew that. But they were free.

## Chapter 9

"DADDY doesn't make us go to sleep at ten o'clock." Sarah faced her mother, legs apart, arms folded in an attitude of defiance.

Kate bit back the angry reply that came to her lips, reminding herself that Sarah wasn't being bad, that she was just a child, trying to cope with changes that had unsettled her life. But I just don't know how much of this I can take, she thought. As the absent parent, Harry was becoming a cross between Santa Claus and the Pied Piper. She feared she was running a poor second by comparison, and she resented the position. She was the custodial parent, such a dreary term, suggesting prisonlike rules, unpleasant necessities. She was the parent who had to see that homework got done, serve nourishing, but not necessarily popular, meals, limit sweets, monitor television-watching and call curfews.

It wasn't an easy job, but somebody had to do it. She looked steadily into Sarah's eyes and forced her voice into a false evenness. "When you visit your father, you don't have school the next morning. You need your sleep on school nights—you know that."

Sarah was not persuaded. "It's more fun over there. Daddy lets us do all kinds of things. And he doesn't say we can't afford stuff, either. I wish we lived there."

Kate was cut to the quick. She felt like saying, "But you're not wanted *there*. This is it, kid, take it or leave it." Instead she said lamely: "Well, this is where you live, Sarah," and hated herself for sounding like a prissy schoolmarm.

She watched her daughter retreat stiffly to her room and wondered where all those wonderful divorces were, the ones that turned up in newspaper and magazine articles. Two former

spouses working perfectly in harmony "for the children's sake." Ha! Each time she'd suggested to Harry that he take it a little easy on indulging the kids, he'd accused her of jealousy (possibly true), interference (well, maybe a little) and all kinds of petty motivations (occasionally guilty, your honor). But how in hell was she going to provide all that stability and continuity the child psychologists talked about if every exposure to Harry brought forth a hailstorm of *how come's* from the children—questions to which she had no civilized answers? If Mommy got the role of the heavy, while Daddy and his girl friend played Lord and Lady Bountiful. All this freedom was certainly no picnic.

"Dammit," she muttered. "Damn you, Harry Sherwood." She felt as if she were choking on her anger and frustration. She yearned to pick up the telephone, to call Harry and demand that he show a little respect and consideration for what she was trying to do. To scream at him and call him names. That was out of the question. She couldn't afford the freedom to tell him what she thought. Not yet, but maybe someday.

She walked over to the closet they had once shared. Traces of Harry still remained: a few silk ties he had neglected to take, the tuxedo he'd had made for their last dinner party. ("Black tie," he had insisted, and then decided that his off-the-rack tuxedo would no longer do.)

She pulled the things out of the closet and threw them on the floor. She stepped on the shiny lapels; and when she took her foot away, she smiled on the dusty imprint that she left behind.

She switched her bedside radio on and turned the dial until she found some rock music. Dancing across the room, she jumped on the tuxedo, grinding her shoes into it, to the beat of the music. And when the music stopped, she examined the suit. Dusty, but no permanent damage done.

She went back to the radio and turned the dial again. A ballad, a tender love song was what she was after. She took a pair of shears from the night table. Humming to the melody of a song that celebrated love and happy endings, she cut the tuxedo to shreds, then gathered up the pieces and stuffed them into the wastebasket.

"That wasn't very nice, Kate," she said out loud. "But it feels great."

## Chapter 10

MARGO looked around the church hall uneasily. She was beginning to be sorry that she had come. It was not really her sort of environment at all. She could feel some abstract sympathy for women who had a need to huddle together for solace, for relief from their problems and concerns, but none of it really had anything to do with her.

Still, Kate had invited her to share this experience, and Kate was very definitely an important part of her life. Kate had promised that the session would be enlightening, interesting and worthwhile. Margo doubted that, as she inspected the women who were assembled around the coffee urn. They all looked pretty dreary to her, except possibly one—a small woman with frizzed hair, dressed in some sort of peasant ensemble. Not St. Laurent, to be sure, but put together with flair and panache. She looked as if she might have something interesting to say.

As the women settled into their seats, Myra Hatfield said: "I see we have a new face with us. Would you like to introduce yourself?"

"I'm Margo Pellegrini," she said. "I'm a friend of Kate. She invited me to come. I don't really have any terrible problems," she added, feeling a need to let them know she was separate, different from them, "but Kate thought it might be helpful. . . ." she trailed off.

"We're glad to have you, Margo," Myra intervened smoothly. "Who'd like to start this evening?"

Kate was eager to speak. "I'm having problems with the kids. I know they have to see their father and his . . . lady friend. But every time they come home, it seems like they're overtired, cranky and spoiled. All they talk about are the things Harry buys them, and the fact that he lets them do things they can't do at home. They're good kids who never gave me this kind

of trouble before, but now I feel as if I have to explain and defend myself constantly. I don't want to talk against their father . . ."

"Why not?" Ellen challenged. "If Harry is creating flak for you, why can't you cut right through to the source of it? Your kids aren't babies. Why don't you tell them that Papa's presents are his trade-off for full-time fathering, which he obviously isn't prepared to give? That's the truth, isn't it?"

"I don't know if I could say that," Kate answered.

"I think Kate's right," Margo interrupted, unable to restrain herself. Ellen's comments had offended her sense of what was proper. "I think it's wrong for one parent to criticize another. I often disagree with my husband, but I never take issue with him in front of our son."

Several pairs of eyes turned on Margo. They were suspicious eyes that took in the careful makeup, the expensive clothes, the slight hauteur of manner: all the talismans that bespoke wealth and privilege, all the comfortable cushions against the mundane worries that plagued the regular members of the group. Margo sensed the negativism that was directed at her, and she stopped speaking.

Dr. Hatfield intervened again. "Perhaps there's something to be said for both points of view. I don't think you want to ignore what's going on, Kate. I understand that you don't want to undermine the children's relationship with their father, but you must respond to the questions the children are asking. Their behavior is really a way of asking questions, you know. Perhaps they're wondering why Harry has changed, why things are different at home and why they have two separate households, whose rules are so different. Do you see what I mean, Kate? If you try not to panic when the children say things that upset you, if you try to see their remarks as symptomatic of their own confusion, you can draw the questions out and answer them as honestly as you can. I don't think you have to protect Harry at the expense of your own relationships. You don't have to attack him. But you can certainly state differences of values and opinions. I think it's healthy for children to know when and if parents differ. A united front, particularly when it's false, is not very healthy or productive in the long run."

Kate nodded. "Yes, I see what you mean. I'll give it a try."

"Good," Ellen said. "Now how about a little help for me. I'm getting so bored bringing the same damn problem here every week. All I'm asking for is a little direction."

Myra Hatfield smiled. "Come on, Ellen, you may think that's what you're asking. But what you've been saying is that you want someone else—me, I think—to make a decision for you. That's not what we're here for."

"Okay, okay," Ellen conceded. "So tell me why I can't make a decision. I've been married to this *putz* for years now. We all know he's going nowhere and that I will have to support him for the rest of our natural lives if I stay. And if I stay, there's no way I can give up teaching for acting. And if I never try, I'll never know whether I'm any good or not. And pretty soon, I'll just be too old and too tired to even care."

"But, Ellen," Kate said, "you keeping calling Noah names. And at the same time, you sound as if you love him."

Ellen looked pityingly at Kate. "Of course, I love him. The way I'd love anyone I lived with, a dog, a cat, even my mother-in-law, the bitch of the Bronx. Look, kid, I'm sorry your husband split on you, really, I am. But I think you'll have to stop seeing being left as the worst thing that can happen to a human being. Sometimes I think the best thing I could do for Noah would be to leave him. Then he'd have to get off his duff and stop spinning those fantasies of being a hotshot producer and start earning a living in the real world. Then I look at that pathetic little *punim* of his, those calf-eyes, and I think, No, Ellen, you're just rationalizing. And all I can come up with is, Okay, but what about me? Doesn't what I need count?"

"You're a good person," Rose said wearily, pushing her long black hair behind her ears as she spoke. Her hair was lanky, her dark eyes smudged with fatigue, and Kate wondered how long it had been since Rose had enjoyed the luxury of sleeping as long as she wanted to, of breakfast in bed, a facial or a good haircut, a day to fill on impulse. "You care about people," she continued. "You know about responsibility. But Ellen, your husband is a grown man, and maybe it's time for you to think about where your responsibility begins and where it ends. You were just a baby when you met Noah. You had stars in your eyes, and maybe he took advantage of that. Oh, I'm not saying he's a bad man, but he made you believe that you could have everything you wanted if you married him. Maybe he believed it, too. It didn't happen. Now you have to figure out if you have to spend the rest of your life paying for a mistake you made when you were too young to know better." As she finished speaking, her voice was stronger, her manner surer, her body erect in her chair.

"She's right," Janine added quietly. "You still have a chance to do something you want very much. You're lucky, Ellen; do you know that? You still want something, and you know what it is. You might as well try. If you don't, you could wake up one morning just like you said—too old and too tired to try. Too young to die."

For a few moments, everyone was quiet. The women knew that Janine was talking about herself. And no one seemed to have any ready comfort for her. The easy suggestions: hobbies, volunteer work or making new friends all seemed too facile and glib.

Finally Dr. Hatfield spoke. "I know how frightening and lonely your days must seem, Janine. And I can only guess at what your nights must be like." Janine was nodding, tears welling in her eyes. "I wish I could make it better for you, but I can't. All we can do here is listen, explore, offer ideas and support. That's a great deal, come to think of it. But the hard part is up to you. The loneliness you're feeling has to do with the kind of life you're leading, as well as with your state of mind. You've lost your most important connection with life, your companion, your friend and lover. You don't have any other important connections to sustain you. You're afraid to go out and make new ones. I'm not criticizing you, Janine, but that kind of fear and insecurity isn't a prerogative of middle age or old age or any age. What I'm going to suggest is that you think about getting some work, something that you can enjoy, that has some meaning for you. Since you're not hard-pressed for money, you have that luxury, and it is a luxury at any age—the chance to fill your days with something that could make you happy."

Janine did not answer, and after a few moments of silence, Wendy spoke. "Well," she said, "if no one else has any good news today, maybe I'll tell you mine." She waited for a response, and when none came, she continued, her voice edged with sarcastic defiance and a little bitterness. "I'm sure you'll all be thrilled for me, but it seems to be working this time."

"I'm glad," Myra said. "Tell us what's going right. That's always nice to hear."

"It's the way Roger is, how he acts with me. It's different. I can tell. I'm not just somebody he screws around with and forgets."

"Is that how you still see yourself?" Myra asked. "As somebody men take to bed and forget?"

Wendy paused. "I can't help it. I try to remember what you and I talk about. But then something always happens, and that's what I seem to be."

"And now? What's happened to change that?"

"It was my birthday. I didn't even say anything to Roger. I didn't want him to think I was hinting for a present. But he just went ahead and made plans for the whole evening. Theater tickets, dinner, and then he spent the whole night and made breakfast for me. It was so nice. It was the best birthday I've had since I came to New York. And Roger said how much he enjoyed the two of us being together like that. I know this means he's thinking about the future, I just know it." Wendy's face was flushed with pleasure as she finished. For that moment, she looked young, unspoiled, innocent in her happiness.

"I'm glad you're feeling more positive," Myra said. "And I hope you're keeping in mind what we discussed before—whether or not this relationship is giving you enough of what you want, day by day, and week by week. Remember, it's when you pin all your hopes on where you think it might go, that's when you start to feel used. You decided you weren't going to trade away pieces of your life on fantasies of the future. Remember that from our last session?"

"I know, I know. But I can't help thinking about the future. I just can't seem to live from day to day."

"It's the only way I can manage to get by nowadays," Rose said, with a short nervous laugh. "John's talking about moving out if we don't put Joey in a special school..."

"Oh, no!" Kate interjected.

"I guess I knew it would come to this," Rose said sadly. "I just don't know what to do..."

"Does it have to be this way?" Kate questioned. "Isn't there any kind of a middle ground? Any compromise?"

Rose shook her head. "I can't think of anything. I wish I could..."

The final moments of the session found the group in a subdued, thoughtful mood. And when Myra Hatfield announced: "Well, I think that's it for tonight," everyone seemed relieved.

"Your friends don't like me," Margo whispered, as they left the church hall.

"They don't know you like I do," Kate said, trying to spare Margo's feelings, for in fact she, too, had sensed the negative undercurrents that were directed toward her friend. "I think

they aren't comfortable with you, not just yet, anyway. It's probably because they think you have everything anyone could want."

"Does anyone?" Margo said lightly, a touch of irony in her voice. "Does anyone, really?"

"I think so. Sometimes, for a while. Then it gets taken away or we decide we want something else and we have to think again. Margo, do you have time for some coffee? I don't feel like going home just yet."

Margo looked at her tiny jeweled watch. "Well . . . Mario said he'd be late tonight, so I suppose it's all right."

Not for the first time, Kate thought how different the terms of Margo's marriage seemed from her own. Although Kate had never wanted much outside her marriage and her home, she had never felt obliged to synchronize her every movement to coincide with her husband's convenience. Perhaps European men were different, she thought. In the time she had known Margo, she had not seen much of Mario. He was certainly attractive in that sleek, well-cared-for style of the rich and well-born. He was reserved, cool, urbane and not, to Kate's mind, very likable. But she could be wrong about that, she conceded. Margo seemed happy enough.

Later, as the two women sat drinking dark coffee lightly flavored with lemon peel, Kate asked: "So, tell me, were you bored? Were you sorry you came?"

Margo rolled her crystal-blue eyes, and Kate thought, How beautiful she is, how expressive her face can be.

"Not bored, darling. Uncomfortable. And that, dear Kate, is a new one on me. I think I wasn't cut out for the company of women. Not collectively, at least. I do much better surrounded by clusters of men. Women don't like me, Kate, and I can't say that I blame them. Men do, and I can't blame them either."

Kate laughed. "Come on, Margo. Be serious. What did you think of the group? As an experience."

Margo fixed her face in an expression of mock seriousness. "Well, then, as an experience, it was . . . like watching those disasters on the news programs. All those infernal human-interest things with people being wretched and ill and thoroughly miserable. It makes me glad I'm sitting where I am and not somewhere else."

"That's all?" Kate seemed disappointed.

"Don't take that personally, Kate. We're different, you and I. That's what makes us interesting to each other. And that, by the way, is why those women probably like you. You have the common touch. Don't be insulted; I mean that in the nicest possible way, to paraphrase Kipling's poem: 'walk with kings, yet keep the common touch.'"

"And you'll be a man, my son'?"

"Whatever. But you do have that kind of ease with people, all kinds; I can tell."

"Really?" Kate was delighted that someone as sophisticated and worldly as Margo felt she had a particular talent.

"Absolutely." Margo took another look at her watch, and Kate asked the question that had been on her mind.

"Do you always feel you have to be home when Mario's there? Or does he . . . insist on it?"

Margo looked startled. "It's the smart thing to do, Kate, and I do it. I know my husband and I know my marriage. It doesn't matter where the impulse comes from."

"Really?"

"Really." Margo looked at Kate's wide-open face and she warmed to the subject of her marriage, something she had never discussed with anyone. "Just in case you hadn't noticed, Mario and I have a very civilized marriage. It's very civilized to take meals together when he's in town. He doesn't like a solitary table or a solitary bed, for that matter. Not unless he chooses it. When he's away, I can fill my time as I wish, more or less. Of course, I know that he finds other diversions then."

Kate looked a little shocked, and Margo smiled. Not a pretty smile. "Don't look like that; your small-town values are showing. Mario is a sophisticated man. He expects to enjoy a little adventure now and then."

Kate still looked doubtful. "I suppose . . . I just never . . . but don't you feel jealous?"

Here Margo's composure slipped a bit, as she wavered between the face she presented to the world and the one she turned into her pillow at night. She looked at her friend. "Yes," she said simply. "Almost all the time. When he's away and when he's here. But it isn't smart to show it. I did once and I saw it was a dreadful mistake." She paused, frowning, as she remembered an evening when she had showed her husband her very private and not very civilized feelings.

"Once," she continued, "I found out that Mario had taken

a little holiday with an old acquaintance of mine, an English girl I modeled with years ago. I felt so betrayed and hurt and jealous. And then I got gloriously and passionately furious. I confronted him, and he just sat there, smiling, as if I were a child having a temper tantrum."

"Oh, Margo," Kate whispered, feeling the other woman's pain, even across the years that had passed.

"I threw one of my best Spode plates at him. I can still remember how it shattered against the wall."

Kate's eyes opened wide, as she tried to imagine Margo's elegant husband being bombarded with flying china. "What did he do?" she asked.

"He laughed. He told me I was being childish and very American. Not to mention bourgeois. Those are two of his favorite put-downs. Then he explained, very patiently, that he was faithful to me, according to his own standards. That means he doesn't chase other women in New York. Of course, he also explained that he expected a more conventional sort of fidelity from me. I don't mind that. Not really. I've never met a man who could hold a candle to Mario. Not for me, anyway."

"I don't know what to say. I think I'd have a hard time being as understanding as you are."

Margo smiled. "I'm just practical, Kate. When the marriage bond has a little flexibility, it doesn't break so easily. At least that's what Mario has taught me. Tell me, were you ever tempted by another man while you were married to Harry?"

"No, I don't think so. I mean, I noticed attractive men. I suppose I even admired them. But I never took the next step. I guess I knew Harry would never stand for it."

"And what about you? How did you feel when you started to believe he had someone else? Before he told you?"

"Like a person who's afraid he has cancer. And he doesn't want to know. He's afraid to go to the doctor, because maybe it won't be true if no one ever puts it into words."

"If you don't want to talk about it..."

"No, it's okay. Really. That's one of the things I've gotten from the group. And from you, Margo. I really appreciated your listening to me when there didn't seem to be anyone else."

"You're welcome. I wish we could have met under other circumstances. For your sake. I haven't really had a close woman friend since Mario and I got married. We moved around a lot. Since he opened his New York office, it seems the women I see are all married to his business associates."

Remembering her own experience, Kate said: "Yes, I know how that is."

"How do you feel about it now? You seem to have done so much since Harry left. I think about it sometimes . . . and I can't even make myself finish the thought, you know, what I would do in your place. The best I can do is to imagine what it would be like to be a rich widow."

"I never thought about it, either, before. It still feels bad sometimes. But I try not to feel sorry for myself. Especially after I hear what other women have to deal with. Now I have such mixed feelings where Harry is concerned. I'm grateful he's helping us financially. Not many men do that, you know, no matter what their legal agreements say. But it just feels so peculiar, that after all those years, we're like strangers. And I suppose I'm a little jealous that he was able to walk away and have a whole new ready-made life. Just like that."

"It's always been easier for men, Kate. They don't sink very deep roots. Maybe that's why we were taught to work so hard at holding them."

"Ain't it the truth," Kate laughed ruefully. "Maybe we should have been taught to be a little fatalistic, too. You know, that it's okay with them and okay without them. Because even when I think I don't want anybody else, I'd hate to think that all I'll have when the children are older are memories of the good years with Harry."

"Oh, God, Kate, that's so depressing. I'm going home before we get stuck in that groove."

"Okay, I'll talk to you tomorrow. Oh, wait, before you go—I do have one nice thing to share with you. I told you that Rick gave me some reviewing assignments, didn't I? Well, tomorrow I review my first off-Broadway play. Want to come?"

"That's wonderful, Kate. I'm so glad for you. Before you know it, you're going to be a regular media personality."

"Don't get carried away. I don't think John Simon has anything to fear from me. But can you come?"

"Can I let you know tomorrow? I'd love to go, but first I have to check Mario's schedule."

"Tomorrow's fine. But try, Margo, if you can. I'm a little nervous, and I'd love to have you along for moral support."

"I'll try. I promise."

As she left Kate and took the short taxi ride to her own luxurious apartment, Margo felt restless, somehow unsettled.

There was something, some nagging feeling that had been activated by the evening she had just spent. She could not put her finger on it.

Finally, when she was drifting off to sleep, her head nestled in a soft bed of down pillows, she realized what it was. She was, for some unthinkable reason, a little jealous of Kate. Of the way in which she seemed somehow to be managing on her own. The way in which she could now make all the decisions that affected her life. She didn't envy the second-rate apartment, the total responsibility for the children, the financial crunch, the lack of help or the absence of amenities.

But there was something, the only thing she remembered with pleasure from her days as a single working woman. It was the hint of excitement that each new day, each new booking brought. The hopes, the tensions, the possibilities. Yes, that was it—the possibilities that kept the adrenaline going, the metabolism racing. That was what she missed.

Although she always counted herself as one of the fortunate few, Margo felt that all she could expect was a sameness to her days. There wasn't much room for anything better, not within her world. She already had a lovely apartment in the city, a fine home in the country, frequent holidays in Europe and the Caribbean. She had an impressive collection of jewels, a wardrobe of furs, a darling red Porsche that she drove in the country. There was really nothing else she wanted, nothing she needed. Although she had never known this kind of luxury when she was single, she had known the tantalizing, teasing pleasure of wanting, hoping and dreaming.

And although she worked very hard now at keeping her body fit and her mind well-informed, there was one thing that was beyond her power of exercise—the capacity for excitement and anticipation. She couldn't imagine what she might anticipate. But Kate, now anything was possible for Kate. She envied her that.

"This is really exciting," Margo said. "I've never been to a play with a member of the press before."

"Just try not to break your neck," Kate cautioned, as the two women threaded their way through rows of bleacher seats in a converted warehouse that went by the name of The New Wave Theatre. The usher, a scruffy-looking teenage girl wearing black jeans and a black turtleneck, led them to a series of seats defined by a rope and a crudely lettered sign saying PRESS.

The press seemed to be represented by a lone man in wire-rimmed spectacles, scribbling notes with an intense air of self-importance. He looked up and frowned disapprovingly as Kate and Margo took their seats and began to giggle.

"What happens now?" Margo asked.

"I'm not sure. I've done a little research on this group. They say they do impressionist renderings of the classics."

"You mean we're not really going to see *The Taming of the Shrew*?"

"Sort of."

"What do you mean, *sort of*?"

"Well, these people seem to feel they can make the classics more relevant. Bring them to a wider audience."

"Really? How?"

"They translate the story into modern terms. Simplify the language."

"What on earth for?"

"I told you, it's supposed to be more relevant. There's a lot of that going around off-Broadway. Haven't you ever seen any experimental theater?"

"No. No, I haven't. Mario won't go anywhere but Broadway."

"Well, then, you're in for a new experience tonight."

When the warehouse was filled to about two-thirds capacity, the house lights dimmed, and the strains of taped disco music were heard. A dark young man in a three-piece suit strolled briskly onstage, in the company of several similarly dressed men. They talked informally of business and sports. The dark young man, who introduced himself as Peter, announced his intention to marry well and find a wife who was wealthy and well-connected.

"I don't think I'm going to like this," Margo whispered.

"Hush. Give them a chance. You can decide not to like it later."

The following scene featured a split-level set. On the first level, Peter was seen dining with a wealthy entrepreneur. On the upper level, his two daughters, Katherine and Blanche, discussed men. Blanche described her many boyfriends, while Katherine interrupted with all the reasons why she had no use for men.

"I think you might be right," Kate whispered.

"I think so, too."

In short order, Katherine was maneuvered into a full-blown

society wedding and then subjected to Peter's campaign to shape her into a perfect executive wife, using a sophisticated combination of brainwashing and "gaslighting" techniques. In the final scene, Peter and Katherine appeared, a perfect couple, sharing and enjoying the trappings of wealth and success. The curtain fell, and then Katherine appeared to deliver an epilogue. Smiling at the audience, she mused about her husband's notions of winning, saying that he had underestimated her and overestimated the power of intimidation, that he had created an adversary instead of a wife, and ending with the cryptic prophecy that in time, he would realize exactly what he had done.

Moderate applause and a few scattered cheers marked the end of the play. The man next to Margo and Kate was scribbling furiously.

"Well?" Kate asked. "What did you think of your first off-Broadway experience?"

"It was . . . interesting."

"You didn't like it."

"Well . . ."

"I don't blame you. One of the things they lost in the translation was the sense of humor. Nobody connected with this production seems to have any."

The man in the next seat scowled at them, picked up his notebook and briefcase and left.

"Maybe he knows the producer," Margo whispered.

"Maybe." Kate giggled. "Let's go get a glass of wine somewhere—lighten up the hangover from the show."

Margo hesitated. "I'd like to, Kate, really I would. But I think I'd better get home. Mario will be in now. I'd invite you over, but . . ."

"I understand. It's okay. No sense rocking the boat over a glass of wine. I'd probably be better off getting myself to the typewriter and starting this review while the whole grim business is still fresh in my mind."

"What are you going to say?"

"I think I'll start by making a list of what works. There were a couple of good things, just in case you didn't notice. Then I'll take it from there."

"Just like you, Kate, trying to make order out of you know what."

"Yeah, well, if I'm going to be any kind of a writer, I'd better work on it."

## *Chapter II*

KATE admitted to herself that she was feeling blue, a little sorry for herself. She'd started missing the kids and feeling bad right after Harry had picked them up for the weekend. She poured a third cup of coffee and tried to count her blessings. She had a job, a place to live, wonderful children and some new friends. But still her life seemed to be filled with empty spaces.

She was doing more, experiencing more than she had in years. Yet the thought that ran most often through her head was: Is this all there is for me? Her social life was, to say the least, limited. Paul had gallantly volunteered to pinch-hit for as long as she needed him, or, in his words, "as long as it takes you to find a man who wants to do kinky heterosexual things with you." But Kate didn't want to lean too heavily on Paul for adult companionship, not when he had such a busy life of his own.

Margo was there, in between her aerobic dance and yoga classes, long lunches and body-maintenance programs. But at night, Margo rarely went anywhere without Mario. Not that Kate had so many evenings to fill. Sarah was just starting to lose that pinched, anxious look she'd taken on when her father had left. And Josh was not yet convinced that one day Kate might not, in spite of repeated assurances, mutate somehow, from a day-in, day-out mommy into an occasional visitor, a near stranger.

Any or all of this would have felt more manageable if she didn't feel so diminished by losing Harry. She was no longer part of Harry and Kate. He seemed to have taken away the most important part and left behind the part that people could pity. No one pitied Harry, she was sure of that. People would probably think he was a clever devil, starting over with a

beautiful, accomplished woman. What they would think about her was: "Poor Kate."

She was probably doomed to find nothing more interesting than an elderly widower—if she was lucky, he would look like Clifton Webb—who might take pity on her and her two semi-orphans. No doubt he would have a half dozen children of his own, and he would need a combination cook-housekeeper and all-round caretaker. They would talk of practical things. Theirs would be a marriage without passion. After all, who could get passionate about an elderly widower with a houseful of children? Or an abandoned woman with two fatherless babes?

And suddenly her mental imagery made her smile ruefully. This was some wonderful mindset, especially for a woman who had urged others to "think positive" on many a park bench. Think positive, she repeated to herself, or you won't even see the opportunities for good things when they come along.

She made a conscious effort to see this weekend off as a gift instead of a punishment. Fill the empty spaces, do things. She could take a long walk, for starters. An article she had just read made a strong case for the tranquillizing, uplifting effect of a good brisk walk. Something about the release of a natural mood elevator manufactured by the brain. So, a long walk it would be. Maybe to the Frick museum. Maybe to Central Park. Maybe a little shopping. She couldn't afford anything really expensive, but maybe some beautiful candles. Yes, some candles in lush, earthy colors. Maybe she could go to The Pottery Barn to do a little nest-refurbishing. A new soufflé dish, perhaps, to replace the one that had been broken when she moved. Then she could make a lovely dinner with candlelight when the children came back.

Having a plan made her feel a little better, put the *poor-me's* on notice. She remembered a conversation she'd once had with Paul, after he'd confided in her about his desperation over his broken love affair. She'd marveled at the public image he'd managed to maintain, at the fact that his public style had never been compromised.

"Kate, dear," he'd said, "remember what old Will Shakespeare wrote, 'All the world's a stage' et cetera? Well, I believe that you can choose what kind of role you play, if you approach your own casting with a dead-on realistic eye. I like the flamboyant, eccentric and somewhat naughty artist. It's a role that fits nicely, and I can do it very well. I like it better than the role of the neurotic half-crazed faggot who's boozed out, drugged

out, wasted and ruined. Don't you agree I made a good choice? And I do it with style. Style, my dear, is something that matters. It's one of the few things you do have some control over. When I'm disappointed or down, I think Bette Davis, and I come up with some very stylish moves. And that's what I'm going to do for the next few years. When I get too old to carry it off, and I assure you, I'll be merciless when it comes to making that decision, then I'll choose a new style. Something grand-old-mannish, I think."

"That's fine for you, Paul. You're an artist. What about ordinary people like me?"

"If you see yourself as ordinary, Kate, then that will have to be your style. I've never seen you that way, but you're the one who has to decide what fits. It's like choosing clothes. You can't carry off an uncomfortable style—you'll look and feel ridiculous."

Today she felt ordinary, lonely and dejected. Paul had assured her that Bette Davis was a good universal role model in matters of style. Okay, she wouldn't be ordinary. She'd square her shoulders and hold her head up. She was great: a career woman, a mother, a very unusual and remarkable person.

She walked briskly up Fifth Avenue, enjoying the scenery, the fine weather. She tried not to notice the lovers who were also enjoying the spring day and focused instead on the single people passing by, trying to guess whether they were happy or not.

Suddenly she thought she saw a familiar figure, emerging from under a building canopy. It was Harry, walking out to the curb to signal a taxi. Behind him came Josh and Sarah, and a tall, slender young woman in a sensational knitted sweater and matching pants.

As the taxi stopped, she watched Harry hand the woman inside. She looked up at him, laughing at some joke they'd obviously just shared. Then he picked up the children, exuberant, in a fine mood. They were all probably headed for a great Saturday treat of some kind. They looked so sleek and happy, so well-matched.

That's my life, she thought, as the cab pulled away. That's my life driving away—my husband, my children. Only I'm not there. It was as if she had died and come back as a ghost, to see life going on without her.

She didn't want to go to the museum at all. She wanted to go home and feel sorry for herself. Bette Davis be damned.

She took a bus home, ready to wallow again for the rest of the weekend. As she let herself into the apartment, she heard the telephone ringing and ran to catch it before it stopped.

It was Paul. "An invitation," he said, "and I've been trying to reach you for hours. Where have you been, you naughty girl?"

"Nowhere," she said glumly. "Absolutely nowhere."

"Come, come, that's not what I like to hear, and I'm going to rescue you. My place. Tonight. I'm having an impromptu musicale. It's going to be great fun, and I think there might be some 'eligibles' for you."

"Eligibles? I don't know, Paul. I don't know if I can face any eligibles. I'm not used to going places on my own."

"Silly girl, this isn't *places*, it's my place. I won't let anyone bite you. And you're just coming to listen to music. A little jazz, some golden oldies. If you don't want to shop around, you don't have to. If it will make you feel better, you can bring a friend. But come. Promise?"

"All right, Paul, I'll come."

After she hung up, she called Margo, on the off-chance that Mario might be busy and that they might not be at their country home. There was no answer. All right, she would be grown-up and go alone. Harry wasn't spending his nights watching *Odd Couple* reruns. She would listen to the music. That was supposed to be uplifting, too. Maybe she'd have better luck with that than with her walk. And maybe, she thought defiantly, maybe she would *shop*.

She searched her closet for something to wear. Harry had always tried to impress upon her the importance of clothing in creating an image. But she never felt as if she had quite mastered those lessons. "When in doubt, wear black," he'd once said. But since there was a chance she'd be wearing black for a long time, so to speak, she wanted something else for tonight. Something that would make her feel womanly. She found a blouse she had almost forgotten about. It had a Victorian flavor. She had made it, one pleasant afternoon, out of antique lace and fine white batiste. That would do, along with a softly gathered skirt of wine-colored wool.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her blondish-brown hair looked dull and lackluster. Impulsively she ran down to the corner pharmacy and looked through the hair-coloring section. She wasn't quite ready for anything radical, so she picked out

a temporary shampoo-in product, one that promised "rich golden highlights."

She applied the contents of the bottle, and after her shampoo, she found that her hair did look "livelier, prettier, more interesting." So far, so good, she thought, and she found to her surprise that she was enjoying the project at hand: making the best of Kate Sherwood. She dug through the medicine cabinet and decided to go all the way: full makeup, eyeliner, mascara, the works.

The door to Paul's apartment was opened by a white-coated houseman, and she was taken back momentarily by the crowd of people. So much for Paul's idea of informal.

The place was much like Paul himself, flamboyant and unpredictable. The first floor of the duplex apartment was glamorous: mirrored walls, stark white floors and ceilings, splashes of vivid color in his paintings and in the abstract designs of the Scandinavian area rugs. It opened onto a wraparound terrace with an incredible view of Central Park, laid out in a scene so pastoral it was hard to believe amid the teeming urban sprawl of the city. The second floor was Paul's work area, a huge open space, ceilinged with skylights and flanked on one side by a greenhouse filled with exotic blooms.

Kate's eyes scanned the assembled guests, trying to find someone to talk to. She spotted Paul, and when he saw her standing alone, he fluttered through a crowd of Gucci-Pucci-Fiorucci's and made his way to her side. In his white tuxedo, he looked like a fallen angel.

"Kate, love, you look grand tonight, more than adequate, yes, you do. I like your hair. What have you done to it? That topknot, it's very sweet. And let me smell—you smell just like wildflowers. But you can't stand here alone, I won't have it. To whom shall I introduce you? Let me choose. I have it, a man of letters. Come with me." He took Kate's hand and led her toward a short man with a longshoreman's body, a pitted complexion that suggested depravity or danger, a pair of enormous, thickly lashed black eyes and close-cut, curly black hair. He was wearing skintight jeans, a black turtleneck, a Harris Tweed jacket and fine leather boots. He seemed to be holding court for an attentive group consisting mainly of women.

Paul parted the group. "John, dear, I want you to meet a very special lady, a dear, dear friend. She's a writer, too, so

I know you'll have *lots* to talk about. I want you to entertain her, as only you can do. Kate, this is none other than the notorious Johnny Love. So be careful—and enjoy."

Kate felt completely awkward and not particularly smitten by her first glance at Johnny Love. Mr. Love (not his real name, she suspected) was a novelist, a poet and a dedicated roughneck who apparently modeled himself (not too successfully, his detractors said) after Ernest Hemingway. Among New York's radical feminists, Johnny and his books were anathema. On at least one public occasion he was burned in effigy, along with copies of his books, his image represented by a pig's face wearing a lascivious leer.

Johnny was a press agent's dream. Without any help at all, he showed up regularly on "Page Six" of the *Post*, either as the principal in a barroom brawl or as the perpetrator of some flagrantly sexist outrage against the city's female population.

At the moment, he was the defendant in an extremely messy divorce case, with his fourth wife demanding an enormous financial settlement on the grounds that Johnny had caused her severe psychic damage. She cited heavy drinking and unspeakable sexual practices, which thus far had only been hinted at in the tabloids, sending his newest novel straight up the best-seller charts.

Having made his introduction, Paul departed, leaving Kate in the throes of extreme embarrassment. He had called her a writer, of all things, to a man like Johnny Love. She dreaded the question that was sure to follow.

"So who do you write for?"

"Oh, I'm not a real writer," she apologized. "Paul is too generous. I just work for a small newspaper—the *Courier*. I don't know if you even know it."

"I've seen it," he said abruptly. He looked as if he was trying to make up his mind whether or not to waste any time with her. "How do you know Paul?"

"We're old friends. I met Paul many years ago. My husband, actually we're separated, does Paul's publicity. He's been wonderful. He helped me get my job, and just so many things . . ." She realized she was rambling, but she couldn't seem to stop.

He gave her a quizzical look. "Never thought of Paul Harmon as a good samaritan. He seems to be in love with himself."

Kate's temper flared. "Then you obviously don't know him very well," she said sharply. "Paul likes to be flamboyant, but

I can assure you he's a wonderful person. And very loyal," she added pointedly.

Johnny smiled, looking at her for the first time. "Okay, okay, I won't go *mano-a-mano* with you over Paul Harmon. That's a very old-fashioned quality, loyalty. And that's an old-fashioned name you have, Kate. Are you an old-fashioned girl?"

"I'm not a girl. And I suppose I am."

"And do you live an old-fashioned life?"

"I did, for a long time."

"And then what happened?"

"My husband left me. For a new-fashioned girl."

"Well, that's certainly frank. So what conclusions did you draw from that experience?"

"Conclusions?"

"Conclusions, Kate. If you're going to be any kind of a writer, you have to learn from your experiences. They'll teach you to write, to provide motivations, to draw characters."

"I think it's too soon for me to draw conclusions. I'm still asking myself questions."

"Like what?"

Something about the man made her reckless, made her answer frankly. "Like whether old-fashioned girls are obsolete, like dinosaurs, and for the same reason. Because they can't survive, because they need to learn to play by men's rules."

His eyes narrowed. "You're not ready to buy all that feminist bullshit, are you?"

Although Kate was light-years from any kind of radical politics, something in Johnny's tone made her challenge him. "How can you lump a whole movement together and call it *bullshit*? That doesn't seem very intelligent to me."

He snorted. "Listen, Kate. All that movement stuff is okay for the newspapers and talk shows. But I know what it means in real life. I lived it."

She was about to ask him what he meant, when she realized that his latest wife, the one who was suing him, was the editor of a leading feminist magazine. The gossips had called their marriage the mismatch of the century, and the lawsuit seemed to demonstrate that they had been right. Kate found this enormously funny, and as she watched Johnny, so intense, so bitter, like an animal ready to spring, she had the urge to tease him. "So what conclusions did you come to?"

For a second she thought he might belt her. Then he laughed, a loud, rich explosive baritone laugh. Just right for a barroom. "Good one, Kate. I like a lady with a sense of humor. My conclusions for the moment are best left private. I will tell you that I have come out of this close encounter a sadder, humbler, perhaps wiser, man."

Somehow Kate did not believe the "humbler" part, and she told Johnny so.

"Ah, that's because you only know the public Johnny Love—an image I helped create, I plead guilty to that. It sells books and it helps me get tables at all the better restaurants. Notoriety is much more effective than virtue in this city. But really, Kate, I have only the utmost respect for women. I have always been a feminist in the true, honest sense. I learned it from my mother, who raised three boys all alone. She was as tough and strong as any man—and as loving as any woman this world has produced."

"Sounds like a tough act to duplicate. But it seems you've tried."

He looked startled, then laughed again. "I see what you mean. You're much sharper than I thought. Are you some kind of shrink?"

"Not guilty. In fact, my husband used to say I wasn't even normally analytical. But you've been married so many times. So either you love to hear 'Oh, Promise Me,' or you're looking for something you haven't found."

"Good, good, go on."

"That's all."

"Too bad. I love to hear a woman analyze me—to my face. It's a marvelous form of voyeurism. Or narcissism. I'm partial to both."

At this point, Kate could think of nothing to say. She dropped her eyes and looked at her shoes.

"So do you want to go out with me?"

She was speechless. She did not have a single notion of what a woman like her would do on a date with Johnny Love.

"What's the matter? Are you afraid of my reputation? I can assure you, I'm not a sexist pig. I've always seen women as my equals, no, my betters. There, does that suit you?"

"It isn't that," she said honestly. "I just don't know if we have anything in common."

He laughed explosively. "I have a big ego, Kate, so I'll

take that as a compliment. Trust me, lady, I'm sure we'll find something. I have to leave you now. Paul's signaling that it's time to make some music. I'll call you soon. What's your last name again?"

"Sherwood," she said, to his retreating back, and then found herself a place to sit, as the assembled guests broke up into small clusters. Conversation dwindled as everyone waited expectantly for the musicians—all amateurs and all Paul's friends—to begin. There were five performers: a saxophone, a trombone, piano, drums and Johnny, playing the trumpet.

When they struck up "Poor Butterfly," she wasn't surprised when he stepped forward, to take a flashy solo. But she was taken at once by the soulful, brooding quality of his playing. Out of his instrument, he coaxed a poignant lament that brought tears to her eyes. Long before he finished, to the sound of enthusiastic applause, Kate found she was looking forward to the prospect of a date with Johnny Love.

"Do you like Greek?" Johnny asked, when he called her three days later.

"Yes," she said, as if she were accustomed to people calling without identifying themselves.

"Good. I made reservations for tonight at Christo's. Meet me there at eight." And then he hung up, without waiting to hear if she had other plans, or if indeed she wanted to meet him.

Of course she did, having decided that a little adventure with Johnny Love was worth a trade-off in certain niceties.

The restaurant was a small one, with whitewashed walls, checkered tablecloths and a fair amount of kitschy atmosphere. When she arrived, Johnny was already there, in deep conversation with the owner, who seemed to be a devoted fan.

Without asking what she wanted, Johnny ordered a bottle of retsina and several dishes, in what seemed to be good Greek. The owner smiled his approval and then turned his attention to Kate. "You are a lucky lady," he said, "to be in the company of such a man."

Kate had the urge to laugh at this, but she nodded noncommittally. When the man had left, Johnny took her hand and looked earnestly into her eyes.

"You are lucky, you know," he said.

"What?"

"To be here with me."

This time she did laugh, long and hard until the tears came to her eyes.

"I know it sounds arrogant," he said, "but I tell the truth. I can make a woman happy—because I'm one of the few men around today who understands them."

"How can you say that?" she asked with genuine curiosity. "Most of the women I know have a hard time understanding themselves."

"It's because I can get past all the politics and rhetoric, right to fundamentals."

"And how do you manage that?" She was fascinated by the sublime confidence he displayed, even though she suspected she should be offended.

"Because I'm one of the few men around who isn't intimidated by women. I don't get intimidated when women bust chops. I figure they do it to weed out the weak and stupid. You'd be surprised how many men fall apart these days. Women keep changing faces, and it confuses them. They don't know that underneath, women are the same as they've always been."

"You sound like you've reduced it all to a simple formula."

"I have. And it is simple. All a man has to do, if he wants to make a woman happy, is to love her. Just like the man says in the song."

"That's it? That's your formula?"

"That's it. It may be simple, but there are a lot of steps involved. First you treat a woman as an equal, that's important. But you never make the mistake of thinking she's the same as you are. She's not. The equal part is hard, too. A lot of women don't want to be equal. They think they lose too much in the trade-off. Sometimes you have to twist their arms to get them to pay attention, to see that they pick up a few gains, too."

"That sounds awfully physical."

"Physical is good, Kate. Don't knock it. That's where it all begins. We get so intellectual, so damned cerebral. We forget how important physical connections are. They're basic. The building blocks for everything."

"I see," she said, not at all comfortable with the direction he was taking.

He pressed on. "That's where I make my best efforts, you know. I'm probably the best damn lover around."

She started giggling. For sheer brass, Johnny Love had to be number one.

"What's so funny?" he demanded. "If I said I was the best damn writer around, you wouldn't laugh, would you?"

"I might. But at least I'd know there was a way you might have reached that stage."

"So? Becoming a great lover isn't so different. You start with a little talent, some basic techniques. . ."

Kate was fascinated, but she had the feeling she should change the subject fast. Did she really want to talk about explicit sex on a first date?

Johnny was warmed to his subject now, and he clearly had no intention of being diverted. "Then you learn about your subject, and you particularize what you know. The custom touch, so to speak. You learn about a woman's tastes, her fantasies, all her hidden desires. You research it—just the way you do when you write. That's where most men strike out. They treat women as if they came off the same assembly line," he finished, so full of himself that Kate felt she had to say something.

"But how can you be so sure that you have all the answers," she teased. "At least when one of your books comes out, you can read the reviews to see if anyone shares your opinions. What do you do to test your claim of being a great lover? Do you ask women to fill out a questionnaire?"

"Listen," he said heatedly, "I don't give a damn about reviews. I'm the one who decides. Not some so-called critic. In the other department, I decide, too. Only a jerk asks a woman if he's a good lover. She'll lie. And he'll deserve it. If you make a woman happy, everything about her will tell you. You don't need words. You can see it. In her face, her eyes, the way she curls up and goes to sleep. And if she doesn't, if she suddenly decides it's time for a lot of conversation, then you know you missed the boat. And if you don't have anything else to give her, then you damn well better give her conversation."

As intrigued as she was with Johnny's exposition on bedroom dynamics, she felt that she had lingered too long, like a window shopper who has spent too much time browsing and is then expected to buy. She had no intention of spending any part of this evening in the bed of a near-stranger. "I read your last book," she said. "It's very different from. . ."

"Kate," he interrupted, "if you're going to be a serious writer, you'll have to learn something about transitions. That was a beaut. 'I read your last book'? Come on, you'll have to

do better than that. Why didn't you just say: 'Johnny, I'm not comfortable discussing sex with you.'"

"All right. Johnny, I'm not comfortable discussing sex with you."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know you very well."

"Don't you think sex is a good ice-breaker?"

"No, I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because it's too personal to share with strangers. And it doesn't really help you to know someone," she said with an authority born of conviction rather than experience. "Sex can't take the place of the other kind of intimacy, the kind you get when you do know someone well."

"But that's pure convention, Kate, don't you know that? In some tribes, for instance, everybody has sex in public. But eating a meal—that's very private and very personal."

"That's interesting, I'm sure. But convention is part of what makes us what we are. I have no problem sharing this meal with you right here, in full view of everyone around us. But I don't think I'd want to take my clothes off and indulge in anything more physical."

"That's just as well," he joked. "We'd probably both be arrested—even though the owner's a friend of mine. But what about later, somewhere else, a more conventional setting?"

"I don't think so. But thanks for asking," she added politely.

"Thanks for asking? Kate, that's the punch line to a gorilla joke. The lady says: 'No, thanks, but it's always nice to be asked.' Doesn't it occur to you that maybe you're a little rigid? That you close yourself off to a lot of interesting life experiences?"

"Maybe," she said shortly, annoyed that Johnny was making her personal preference into a character disorder. "But can't we leave it alone?"

"Sure," He smiled, all sudden charm. "Here, you're not eating the eggplant. Take a little on the bread, like this..."

She had the feeling the subject wasn't closed, not by a long shot. She searched her mental inventory of social graces for a way she might end the evening with a simple handshake or something equally innocuous.

But when the meal ended, she still hadn't come up with anything smooth or sophisticated.

"Want to come to my place for a drink?" he asked, with studied casualness.

"No, thanks," she said, "not tonight," trying to sound flexible.

"What about inviting me to your place for a drink, then?"

"For a drink," she said with emphasis. "Sure."

As they climbed the long flights to her apartment, she noticed how easily he took the stairs, and she wondered in spite of herself what he looked like without a shirt and jacket.

She opened the door and flipped on the hall light. "Paul Harmon," he said, pointing to the painting that jumped out at them. "Right?"

"Right," she said. She went through the apartment, turning on all the lights, hoping to make a statement of intent. She paid the sitter and turned to Johnny. "I can offer you some white wine or red wine, that's it."

"Whatever you're having."

She poured two glasses of white wine and gave one to Johnny. "Thanks for dinner," she said, saying in effect that the evening was more or less over.

"You're welcome. How many kids have you got?"

"Two."

"Asleep?"

"Yes, I think so."

He looked around, taking in the floor plan of the apartment. Was he checking the location of her bedroom? Measuring the distance from where the children slept?

"Do you spend much time with Paul?" he asked unexpectedly.

"Some. He's been a good friend to me. I told you that."

"Yeah, well, I'm all for friendship. But you want to be careful. After a divorce, you don't want to surround yourself with safe men. And children. All those things can insulate you, and before you know it, you've walled yourself up."

"I don't think I do that," she said, resenting the suggestion that she liked Paul because he was gay. And *safe*, whatever that meant.

"Good," he said, his voice getting husky. "Because you'd miss a lot." He put his drink down and trailed his fingers along her forearm.

She shivered involuntarily and stood up so abruptly that

some of her wine sloshed on her dress. "I'm really tired, Johnny—do you mind if we call it a night?"

"That isn't what you really want, is it?" he asked in that same seductive voice. "But if you tell me to leave, I will." He put his arm around her and started to walk toward the door.

Before she knew exactly what was happening, she found herself on the floor, flat on her back, staring up into Johnny's mocking face. "Isn't this more comfortable," he whispered.

She tried to muster up a good measure of indignation, to ignore the pressure of Johnny's body against hers. "Do you do this sort of thing with your men friends?" she asked.

"Huh?" He looked puzzled.

"Well, you talked about equality. I'm asking you if this is your idea of equality."

He smiled down at her, confident again. "I said equal—not the same, remember?"

"It's hard to feel equal in this position, Johnny. It doesn't exactly break any new ground, does it?"

"Okay," he said, shifting his weight so she could get up. "I can see that you're determined to deprive yourself of a really memorable experience. It's your loss, Kate Sherwood," he said. "I was just trying to make it easier for you to say yes."

"I appreciate that," she said, "and, really, it has been a memorable evening. Truly."

"Okay. Then maybe I'll give you another chance. Maybe."

She double-locked the door after he left, wishing she could miraculously acquire all the sophistication it took to be single these days. Johnny had been right about one thing: she hadn't been nearly as unequivocal in her refusal as she'd said. Oh, she was certain she didn't want a sexual encounter then and there. But something in her had responded to his touch, to the pressure of a male body against hers. Something very basic and fundamental, something that wouldn't be completely regulated by her common sense.

After a hasty shower, she punched up the pillows on her bed and jumped in, consoling herself with the thought that tomorrow was group night. Tomorrow she could relive this whole scenario and see how it seemed on an instant replay.

"Am I being old-fashioned?" she asked, after giving the group a capsule version of her date with Johnny. "Sex was all right with Harry most of the time, and I always thought it was

because we were comfortable with each other. And because we cared."

"And why have you changed your mind?" Myra Hatfield asked.

"I haven't changed my mind. I just wonder if that kind of thinking is passé. The man I was out with last night—he made it sound as if I was something from the Stone Age because I didn't want to go to bed with him."

"That doesn't sound like a question. You just said you didn't want to go to bed with him."

"I didn't—not last night. I did feel something, but I just didn't think the question should have even come up."

"That's another question altogether," Myra said. "It sounds more like an issue of timing than of principle. What did this man say when you explained how you felt?"

Kate burst out laughing. "I can't—oh, I just can't say it. He said... oh God..." She giggled uncontrollably and then hiccuped out: "He... said... he was... he said he was the world's greatest lover."

Ellen shrieked her appreciation, and soon all the women were laughing hysterically, sides aching, tears rolling down their cheeks. "Now I know you were right to say no," Ellen said. "Any man who promises to take you to the moon is going to run out of gas before he hits Asbury Park."

The laughter started again, making conversation impossible.

Finally Kate found her voice again. "So you don't think I'm being old-fashioned?"

"I think you're being very sensible, dear," said Janine. "You're supposed to be a modern woman. You should be able to decide yes or no for yourself, without listening to any man."

"Well, I don't know what all the fuss is about," Wendy said. "If he hadn't taken any notice of you, then you'd have wondered what was wrong. Admit it."

"I guess you're all right," Kate said. "I just started to wonder if—if well, maybe I turned Johnny off and he wouldn't call again."

"Oh, Kate," Ellen said disgustedly, "that's high-school stuff. If he's interested, he'll call. That's it. Period."

A week, then two, went by, and Johnny did not call. That's that, she told herself. Forget it. You spent one evening with the guy and nothing came of it.

But Kate found it difficult to take her own advice. Johnny Love was the most interesting man to cross her path since Harry, and it mattered that he had not returned. Impulsively she called Paul.

After a few minutes of small talk, she said: "Uh, Paul, I was wondering, have you seen Johnny lately?"

A long pause followed. "Kate, sweet, I know you spent some time with him at my party. I thought maybe you'd have a little fun with him. Maybe flex a few glands. I didn't expect it to get . . . personal."

"Paul—what are you talking about?"

He sighed audibly. "Well, dearest Kate, when I introduced you to Johnny, he was . . . between engagements, so to speak. The model he'd been seeing, Kiki Winters, well, they'd had a big row—at Regine's of all places. She threw a drink at him, very Hollywood B-movie, and stalked out in a high dudgeon. I know you don't follow these things, but it made all the gossip columns. Miz Winters gave Mr. Love a hard time for a while, and now they're back together again. True love, I'm sure," he mocked.

"I see."

"Oh, Kate, you don't. Oh, I should be shot; I can tell from your voice. You're hurt. Kate, love, you didn't want to get involved with a man like Johnny. That would be poison for you. He's all right as a sex object if you like brawny, excessively macho types, but, Kate, you're much too fine for a man like that. Trust me, Kate, it's true."

"Okay, Paul, I believe you. I just feel lousy. Look, I have to go. I think there's someone at the door. I'll talk to you soon."

She hung up quickly because she felt like she was going to cry. Paul was right, of course. She had nothing in common with a man like Johnny. She knew she had better start listening to her common sense. If she didn't, she'd never survive this new single life.

## Chapter 12

It had been a very long, very hard day, and Kate was glad to see it end. As grateful as she was for her job, as much as she normally savored the demands it made on her, there were, now and then, great-to-get-over-with days. This had been one of them.

Somewhere around four o'clock, she had decided she couldn't face the prospect of cooking dinner and doing all her usual after-work chores. She had called the teenager who occasionally sat for her and asked the girl to feed the children and to get them ready for bed. She had also called Margo, in the hope that her friend was free to share a glass of wine and some unwinding time. Margo had offered both the time and some dinner, which she had gratefully accepted.

When Kate arrived at the Pellegrini apartment, Margo was, as always, beautifully groomed and all of a piece with her lovely home. "Come in, Kate," she invited. "You look tired."

"I am. By popular demand—Rick's—my day started at eight."

"You poor thing. Here, let's sit in my bedroom. You can stretch out and relax. I don't expect Mario for hours."

"Bless you," Kate said, following Margo into the spacious bedroom and sinking down on the puffy down quilt. "You are a friend indeed," she sighed.

"I have some salads and white wine on a tray for us. Any time you're ready, we can eat. Why don't you tell me about your day."

Kate smiled. "You sound just like a good wife, which makes me wish I had one waiting at home, always ready with a nice dinner and a sympathetic ear."

"Really, Kate, Thelma fixed the salad, and it's not a sym-

pathetic ear I'm offering. I like to hear what you've done all day."

"Well, then, you're going to love this. Today was pure glamour. Can you tell from my dirty shirt and these disgusting jeans? Today, Rick and I practically put out the *Courier* alone. Everybody else seems to be out with the flu. Even the advertising department—all two people. On top of everything else, I had to run around picking up advertising copy from a bunch of stores and restaurants. Then I had to type up all the listings myself. In my spare time, I helped Rick write headlines. He was sweet, though. He kept telling me what a 'good girl' I was. He even offered to take me for a drink after we finished up."

"He sounds like a nice person. You're lucky to have such a sympathetic employer."

"Funny, I forget that he is an employer sometimes. I think he forgets he's my boss, too. He acts like we're all in it together. The *Courier*, I mean. Oh, and listen to this, today of all days when we're up to our ears in garbage, Rick turns to me and tells me he wants to start another column. His timing was hilarious. I just started to laugh. He looked puzzled for a second. Then he said: 'Ah, yes, darlin', I see what you mean.' And he went on to tell me about this column, a shopping column, that he wants to highlight interesting things from Village shops. He decided it would be a good way to attract new retail advertisers."

"Does he want you to do it? I don't know how you'd find the time..."

"No, he didn't ask me to do it. I think Rick knows that shopping's not my particular talent. He just wanted my opinion. I told him I thought it was a good idea."

Margo was silent for a moment. "Kate..." she said tentatively.

"Hmm," Kate murmured contentedly, as she snuggled into Margo's bed.

"I want to ask you something. And I want you to give me an honest answer."

"Okay. What?"

"Do you think I might have a try at it? The shopping column?"

"You!" Kate sat upright, wide awake now. "For heaven's sake, why would you want to?"

"First answer my question, and then I'll tell you."

"Okay. I suppose it's possible. Have you ever done any writing?"

"No, but I've done a lot of shopping. I know about . . . things. I read a lot of magazines. Is the writing that important?"

"To a point. But I could help you with that. Now tell me why we're having this conversation. I'd say whoever does this column stands to make about two dollars an hour. Tops."

"You know it isn't the money. It's me," she sighed, absently smoothing the silky hair that hung loose and wavy around her face. "Lately I've felt so . . . I don't know . . . restless. Too much time to fill. There just isn't enough excitement in anything I do."

Kate looked hard at her friend and saw for the first time that Margo's life might not be as enviable as it seemed on the surface. Perhaps Margo's needs were different. Perhaps a husband and a child and a home did not fill her the way they had once filled Kate.

"I don't want to disillusion you," she said, "but if you think this kind of work is exciting . . ."

"Different, Kate. And mine. It would be something I could do on my own. I think I'd even get a kick out of the two dollars an hour. Didn't you ever feel this way when you were with Harry?"

Kate was startled at the question, echoing as it did her thoughts of a few moments before. "No," she said. "I don't think I did."

"But what about now, now that you've tasted something else? Would you be able to just stay at home?"

"No," she answered, with a conviction that surprised her. "No, I guess I couldn't go back. But my situation is a little different. I was pushed out of my nest. I didn't imagine you'd want to leave yours—it seems so comfortable."

"It is. It's been everything I ever thought I wanted. For a long time I felt like a very lucky woman. But lately I've been bored with it all. I hate to sound like such an ingrate, but I'm tired of getting up every day and doing the same old things. I don't like drinking too much, which is what I do when I'm bored. This—this sounds like it could be a challenge. Do you understand, Kate?"

"I think so. And if you really want to do it, I'll talk to Rick. You know what this reminds me of?" She laughed. "We're going to have to concoct a cover story for you. Just like Paul did for me. Mind you, I don't think Rick will be a problem."

Now that I'm a seasoned *Courier* veteran, I can help you get started. This kind of column doesn't involve spending much time in the office. All you'd have to do is drop off your copy once a week. How you get the material will be up to you. We can collaborate on putting it together, until you get the hang of it."

"Wait a minute, Kate, I just thought of something. How much help do you think I'll need? You don't have much free time, and I don't want..."

"It won't take much. Really. You'll do all the legwork, finding the stuff and getting all the details. I'll just help you arrange the information, show you some style. Besides, we're friends. We spend lots of time together anyway. So we'll just work on copy instead of drinking wine and exchanging gossip."

"Do you mean that?"

"Sure. I want to do this. It's the first time I'll be able to give you something back. I'll feel less like a charity case."

"Kate!"

"Well, it's true. You were my first friend when Harry left. Having you helped me feel less alone. I owe you for that. But if it embarrasses you to hear it, I won't say it anymore. Now, what are we going to say when we introduce you to Rick? Should we say that you're a world-famous consumer reporter living incognito in Greenwich Village?"

Margo laughed. "That's not such a bad idea. Telling someone you're a prize is always good strategy. But I don't know about passing for a world-famous consumer reporter..."

"Okay, how about world-famous model?"

"I never did make *world-famous*... but I was certainly there. I know—we could say I worked as a stylist. That would prove I knew something about fashion. And details."

"That's good. Maybe we shouldn't stretch it beyond that. Do you want to come in tomorrow? I'll tell Rick about you as soon as I get into the office. Then you can come in and meet him before he gets a bee in his bonnet and calls someone else. And Margo... just one thing..."

"What?"

"Maybe you should... dress down a little when you come in. The *Courier* isn't *Town & Country*. It's grubby and run-down, and I don't want Rick to think you wandered into the wrong place by mistake."

Margo considered Kate's suggestion. "No," she said. "I don't think I'll do that. I don't mind fibbing about my back-

ground. But I don't want to pretend to be someone else. If Rick turns off when he sees me, I'll just have to take that chance."

Kate smiled at her friend. "Well, Mrs. Pellegrini, you certainly have a lot of class. Not to mention integrity. Okay, we'll do it your way. Let's just hope that Rick is sufficiently sober to appreciate a beautiful, elegant woman."

The following morning, Kate tried to lay the groundwork for Margo's arrival. Though she was no longer the *Courier's* official go-fer, she made a fresh pot of coffee and brought a cup to Rick's desk.

"Here you are," she said. "After the day we had yesterday, you can probably use an eye-opener."

When Rick turned bloodshot eyes on her, Kate regretted her choice of words. It certainly looked as if her boss had tied one on last night. "Darlin' Kate," he said, in a voice serrated with rye whiskey, "you're very kind. And my experience tells me that when a lady offers kindnesses so early in the day, she is looking for a little something in return. I hope you're not going to ask for more money, because the *Courier* is fresh out. Indeed the wolf is gnawing right through our front door this month."

"No, Rick, I don't want any money. Well, actually I do, but I'm not asking you for it. I wanted to ask about the column we discussed yesterday."

"What column?"

"The shopping column. Remember? You said it would be good for advertising. It would feature things from Village shops..."

"Ah, yes, that column. Forgive me, Kate, I have more pressing concerns at the moment. Well, what about it? Do you want to take it on?"

"No, not me. But after I left last night, I talked to a friend of mine. She used to be a model. And a fashion stylist. She has wonderful taste, and she's lived in the Village for a long time. She knows the stores here very well. She'd really like to do it, Rick. And it would please me a lot if you'd let her try. Would you see her, Rick? I told her she could come by later..."

"Does she have any of what we laughingly refer to around here as writing experience? Not that I can afford much of that, mind you."

Kate decided to be half-honest with Rick, calculating that he might hire Margo anyway. "Not really," she said. "But I can help her. On my own time. I promise. She'll be good, really."

"She needs the extra money, this friend of yours? Is that it? I can't pay much, you know that."

"No, Rick, she doesn't need the money. Not at all. But you'll have to pay her something. Just to make it legitimate. She needs the work. Can you understand that?"

He smiled, his craggy features softening. "Yes, dear Kate, I can understand that. Why do you think I'm here? All right, darlin' girl, bring me another cup of this fine coffee. And I'll see your friend."

"Thank you, Rick. You really are a *darlin'* yourself."

"I know," he sighed heavily. "It's been my ruination."

Margo made her appearance just before noon. Her blond hair was sleek and shiny, her makeup flawless. As a concession to physical conditions at the *Courier*, she was wearing navy gabardine slacks and a matching cashmere pullover.

Kate ran to meet her, to guide her past the obstacle course of scruffy furniture and random litter, toward the editor's desk. "Rick," she said, "I want you to meet Margo Pellegrini. She's the woman I was telling you about. My best friend," she added, hoping to make Rick understand that she really wanted this favor.

Rick got up from his desk and extended a beefy hand in greeting. "Good day, Miss Pellegrini—Mrs.," he amended, noting the gold band on her left hand. "I'm delighted to meet a friend of Kate's."

When the introduction was completed, Kate went back to her own desk. She pretended to busy herself with work as she watched the tableau at Rick's desk. Margo was smiling, at ease. At one point Rick let out a hearty laugh. Then he chuckled a few times. Kate relaxed as Rick patted Margo's shoulder, then shook her hand, smiling. As Margo left, she passed Kate's desk and signaled her friend with a smile and a wink.

Kate got up and went directly to Rick. "Well?" she asked. "Are you going to do it? Are you going to let Margo write the column?"

"How could I say no," he asked rhetorically, "to a pair of charmers like you? Yes, darlin', I told your friend she could start next week. Mind now, do what you promised. Decent

copy, remember. I don't care how the two of you do it, just make sure I get decent copy. Now go on, and let me do my work."

Impulsively Kate hugged her boss. "Oh, you're such a good person. And you won't be sorry."

To her surprise, Kate found that Margo did not mind doing the tedious legwork involved in gathering material for the column. She went patiently from shop to shop, searching for unusual accessories, notable bits of bric-a-brac or original services. She made careful notes in a leather-bound book from Ferragamo, detailing descriptions and prices. Then she typed out careful sentences, two-finger style, on her Olivetti portable and brought them to Kate for shaping.

For her part, Kate found it easy to explain the basic rules of newspaper style. The rules were fresh in her mind because she had learned them so recently herself, in the same on-the-job fashion. The hard part was pointing out Margo's mistakes without damaging her confidence.

"I feel like such a dummy," Margo apologized once, as Kate pointed out that a particular adjective had appeared four times on a single page. "Just like a stereotypical dumb blonde. When you read this stuff in magazines, it all seems so simple. But when you try to do it, oh, boy, do you feel dumb!"

"Don't feel dumb. Doing this is like riding a bicycle. It looks easy when you watch, and it gets easy to do after you learn how. And that's what you're doing now, learning, just like I did."

"I think you're just saying that to make me feel good. So you can tell me, quick, if I can't call these potholders *whimsical*, what can I say instead?"

## Chapter 13

"ELLEN, Ellen, wake up." She opened her eyes, with some difficulty and saw Noah, all two-hundred-twenty pounds of him, encased in one of the polyester safari suits he fancied. With his thinning hair, his graying mustache and beard, his eyes barely visible behind thick horn-rimmed glasses, he looked like a large and not unlovable overstuffed toy.

"What do you want, Noah?" she asked, in a voice one would use with a child.

"I need some money, Ellen. I told you yesterday, I'm having a breakfast meeting with Gene Seltzer. He's putting together a new musical, and he wants to talk to me. Don't you listen?" he complained.

"I listen, Noah," she muttered. "I listen. I just don't always hear. What do you need money for? And how much?"

"Twenty dollars? I want to pick up the check, you know how that is."

"Oh, sure, I know how that is. I go around picking up breakfast checks for producers all the time. *La dolce vita*, that's my life." While she complained, she padded out of bed, her slim, tiny body barely outlined in the oversize T-shirt she wore for sleeping. She opened her purse and fished out two ten-dollar bills, which left her with exactly twenty-seven dollars and change.

"Thank you, Ellen," he said, as she pressed the bills into his moist chubby hand. "You'll get it back, I promise."

"Yeah, sure. Have a good time."

"I made coffee for you. And I got a fresh bagel, sesame, and some cream cheese."

"Thank you," she said, to his retreating back. Noah was not a bad person. Just incompetent and ineffectual and an increasingly heavy burden for her.

She drank two cups of the coffee Noah had made and ate the bagel with cream cheese. With a heavy sigh, she decided to check in with her agent. Time to beat the bushes for some more ready cash, especially if Noah was going off on another of his pipe dreams. There wasn't a prayer that Gene Seltzer would offer him anything more substantial than a flunky job. If Noah had any brains, he'd take it. But he wouldn't. And pretty soon all these charity offers were going to dry up completely.

Noah was a man who could make a limited contribution to a production. If only he'd recognize that and do it well, things would be better. But, no, he kept seeing himself as a would-be *Nederlander*, a Shubert in search of an opportunity.

She dialed Marjorie Cooper's number, identified herself to the receptionist and waited.

"Hello, Ellen, what can I do for you?" Marjorie asked.

"Anything doing, Marge? I need the money, and I wondered if you'd heard about anything that might be right for me."

"Couple of commercials casting this week. Are you interested? Really interested?"

"If they pay money, I'm interested. And what do you mean by that, anyway?"

"Well," Marjorie said slowly, "I don't want to suggest that you're not good. Or that your unprofessional. But the last time I sent you out, the casting director, Peg Thompson, said she thought you didn't take the material as seriously as you should."

"Take it seriously? For God's sake, Marge, it was a nose spray commercial. What did she expect? The soliloquy from *Hamlet*? I'm not a snob, Marge, God knows I can't afford to be, but it's hard to get up there for toilet paper or dog food."

"Lots of actresses do, my dear. And they're the ones who get the jobs. Look, Ellen, I've told you this a hundred times. If you don't like commercials, stay away from them. Make your money in other ways. Drive a cab, teach your students, whatever. Do what you do best. Go after the serious work. Marshall Harris is casting a new Lloyd Boch play. There's a part that might be right for you. Do you want me to send you out for it?"

"Okay. Where and when? And give me the particulars on the commercials. I won't embarrass you, Marge, I promise."

Ellen scribbled addresses and times into her diary and hung up. Her agent was right. She should be doing serious work or at least work she could take seriously. If she could work with

Marshall Harris, that would be a big forward step for her. Marshall was supposed to be a royal pain, but actors who worked with him got noticed. And to be noticed was what she needed. It was just that she couldn't seem to afford the luxury of being in the right places at the right time. Didn't have the freedom to buy her own opportunities. Boxed into this rut where she worked just for money. Coaching other actors for their opportunities. Taking jobs to pay the rent and for Noah's follies.

She washed her face, brushed her teeth and dressed quickly in one of her few good outfits, a pair of black wool slacks and a matching turtleneck sweater. She fluffed up her hair with a pick, packed her oversize tote bag, and headed uptown for the offices of Jensen and Marsh, casting directors. She would make a really sincere effort to get this commercial, and then maybe she could afford to try out for the Marshall Harris show next week.

Her resolve wavered when she saw the assembled group of women in the anteroom of the casting office. No one there seemed to have any hint of an ethnic heritage at all. All of the competition seemed to have been hatched from the same blond-haired, blue-eyed chromosomes, the same straight noses and even straighter teeth. Bless Marjorie's little heart, she thought. What is a nice Jewish girl from Brooklyn doing with this gang of shikshas?

She took the single page of dialogue that the receptionist was distributing. It was to be a cold reading. A sincere, head-on pitch for a polyunsaturated oil. When it was her turn to read, she focused all her concentration on convincing her audience of the merits of Lightline Oil. And when she was finished she searched the faces around her—the director, the producer, assorted minions—for a flicker of genuine interest. But “Thank you very much, we'll be in touch” was all she got.

Not much chance there of building up her twenty-seven dollar cash reserve, she concluded. Thank goodness for her acting students, at least for those who paid on time.

She fished a subway token out of her bag and descended the concrete steps, down to the Sixth Avenue line. A train was just pulling into the station. As she ran for it, she was jostled by a thin young man who muttered a hasty “Sorry” and raced past her. A split second later, as the train doors were closing behind her, she felt instinctively that something was wrong. She reached inside her bag and found that her wallet was miss-

ing. "Damn," she said, "damn, damn, damn." She sat down, giving in to the frustration that had been building all day.

By the time she arrived home, frustration had given way to hot, boiling anger. Enough, she said, over and over to herself. Enough. Where is it written, Ellen Hirschorn, that you are responsible for everything and everyone you touch? Nowhere. Maybe it used to be that way. Another time. And maybe it isn't anymore. No one gave a damn about anyone else, it seemed.

A hundred years from now, when I'm dead, who's going to care whether or not I did the right things. Nobody. Not me certainly. At least I can make it better for me. Right now. She sat down and wrote Noah a letter.

Dear Noah,

There isn't any easy way to do this, but it's time. I need to move on, Noah. I need to move on and try out my own dreams. I can't subsidize yours any longer. You'll have to find a way to do that yourself. I'm leaving you and this place where I've stayed too long. Not this minute, but soon. And you'll have to think about making your own way.

Ellen

She sat in a chair and waited for him to return. "How did it go?" she asked gently.

"That son of a bitch," he sputtered, his chubby face twisted with indignation. "Do you know what he had the nerve to offer me?"

"What?"

"Assistant stage manager. Imagine! Me—who produced *Little Nothings*. One of the best off-Broadway shows in history. One of the best, that's what they all said."

She didn't have the heart to remind him that *Little Nothings* happened a lot of years ago.

"I told him what he could do with his offer. Take the job and give it to some kid. To somebody who didn't know what he was doing. I told him not to call me again unless he had something worth my time."

She didn't have the heart to tell him that he wouldn't hear from Gene Seltzer again. And that the conversation would

probably become part of a growing repertory of Noah Hirschorn jokes that circulated among theater people. The man she married. Pygmalion turned Pagliacci.

"Noah," she said softly, "I'm sorry it didn't work out. But there's something on my mind. I want you to take this letter and read it. Right now. And then we have to talk." She handed him the envelope and went into the bathroom. She knew it was a little cruel to do what she was doing, right on the heels of his disappointment. But with Noah, there could never be a good time to leave. Every day brought another disappointment.

She waited a few minutes and went back into the living room. He sat there, her great big balloon of a husband, the note clutched in his hands, tears streaming down his face.

He looked up at her, with an expression of utter bewilderment. "Why, Ellen?" he sobbed. "Why? I thought you were happy."

Dear God, she thought. Only an idiot could have imagined that, only a man who had no grasp of reality, even when it stared him in the face. "I need to, Noah. I need to make some changes now, for myself. Before it's too late. I'm still going to be around for you. I'll help you as much as I can. But I just can't carry you any more. You'll have to get a job. Right now. Something that pays regular money. And you'll have to do the other things on your own time."

"Ellen—Ellen, can't we . . . ?"

"No," she said, as kindly as she could. "We can't. I need to do this. Really I do."

He nodded, accepting what he couldn't understand. Noah Hirschorn was a man who had learned to take no for an answer, without ever knowing what it would take to make the yesses happen. And she needed to separate herself from this condition before time ran out for both of them.

## Chapter 14

As she slumped over her desk at the *Courier*, Kate let go the flood of tears that had been building since her stormy conversation with Harry the evening before.

"You and the kids seem to be eating money for breakfast, lunch and dinner, Kate," he had said, before he had informed her that she would have to make do with less. "I can't go on supporting you in luxury," he'd finished.

She had almost laughed when she looked around at the apartment that Harry had just included in his description of *luxury*. Paul's painting and the furniture she'd salvaged from her marriage were the only barriers that stood between her and an environment that advertised genteel poverty.

She had listened to Harry's complaints, his account of hard times and rising expenses and his argument that there was no reason she couldn't manage on less. No reason at all, she thought bitterly, providing they gave up all the luxuries they had just begun to afford—the occasional dinner out and the day trips that included entertainments that weren't part of her job.

She would manage, of course, as she had done each time her income had shrunk. Harry seemed to have a sixth sense, she thought. Each time she found herself a few dollars ahead, he came up with a new austerity program.

Now that she had lost her innocence where Harry was concerned, she understood exactly how his mind was working. They weren't married anymore. He got no return whatever on his investment, unless it was the satisfaction of knowing that Josh and Sarah were decently cared for. His life now was with a woman named Laurie. His attitude was perfectly understandable.

"But it stinks," she muttered, knowing full well that Harry could afford the extra money, that taking it away was just another gratuitous exercise of his power over their lives. And he did it with that "Why can't you do better?" attitude that could still get to her, still make her feel inadequate and in-the-wrong.

As she remembered the bitter words of the evening before, she started to cry, tears of frustration and anger. She didn't hear the door open, didn't realize she was no longer alone until she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Is this a private wake or are mourners welcome?"

She jumped, flustered at being caught in her private misery. "Oh, Rick, I didn't hear you come in. Don't look at me, I just had a bad night, that's all."

"*That's all* sounds bad enough, especially if you came here to do your crying."

"It's not so bad, really. Not compared with all the disasters that could happen. It's money again. I think my time of leaning on Harry is running out. It scares me. It costs so much just to wake up these days. The mail always seems to be full of bills. I have to make more money, and I don't know how."

"Ah, Kate," Rick sighed, clapping a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry you're having these problems. You're a good girl, I wish I could pay you more..."

"Oh, no, Rick." She turned to face him. "I wasn't hinting... I mean I know you can't... I just have to find another way."

"Listen," he said. "Maybe I can introduce you to some people who can give you free-lance work. At the women's magazines. I know some people. The competition for the work is fierce, and I don't know if I can do you any good... but let's give it a try."

"You mean writing articles? But I don't have a lot of experience. Isn't that what you need for those assignments? Writers who specialize?"

"Well, that's true sometimes. If you had a solid background writing medical material or the like, you'd probably be able to get more work doing the same. But there's a fair amount of work for writers who have a nice touch. You have that, Kate, I think it's your lack of experience. You can write simple, clean stories that make people feel good. That should count for something. Here, let me write down some names for you. And I'll make some phone calls. Introductions, Kate darlin';

sometimes they're worth more in dollars and cents than experience. At least they get you past the front door."

Kate wiped her hand across her cheeks, sweeping away the damp tear tracks that stained her face. "Thanks, Rick. You've helped me so much..."

"Save it, Kate," he said gruffly, and she knew she had embarrassed him. "Let's see if these names lead to anything. When you make your first sale, you can buy me a drink."

Kate sat in the reception room of *Woman's Week* magazine with an advanced case of the fidgets. She had already visited three of the publications on the list Rick had given her, and each time, her experience had been more or less the same. The editors had looked politely at the sample articles she had brought with her, politely given her about five minutes' worth of attention, briefed her on their current needs and then suggested she submit proposals for specific articles she might want to do. She hadn't exactly been dismissed, but it was clear that Rick's introductions had given her no particular edge. She would still have to go through the normal free-lance channels, to compete with the hundreds of queries that passed through the editorial machinery every week. None of her meetings had held out any hope of adding to her income in the near future.

She fully expected a repetition of the same scenario at *Woman's Week*. The other people she had seen had been senior editors, but Ross Benson, the man she was waiting for, was the publisher of *Woman's Week* and several other top magazines. He would probably give her even less than five minutes. She was surprised actually that he had agreed to see her at all.

She clutched nervously at the leather portfolio that held carefully mounted copies of her best *Courier* pieces, ready to jump up the minute the receptionist gave her the signal. She was now self-conscious that all her articles had been for the *Courier*, a small, limited-circulation newspaper. All the editors she'd met had asked pointedly if she had anything else in her background, and she'd been forced reluctantly to say no. The question made her aware that she was trying to make a giant leap, from the minor leagues of publishing to the majors, with not much to recommend her, not much outside of Rick's rather touching confidence in her potential.

"Miz Sherwood?" The receptionist glanced in her direction. "Mr. Benson's assistant will be with you in a moment."

Kate smoothed her skirt, wet her lips and dried her clammy

hands with a handkerchief. Ross Benson's assistant, a solid-looking, middle-aged woman appeared, smiled perfunctorily and invited Kate to follow, down the narrow corridors that snaked past the individual offices, toward what was clearly the executive suite.

Ross Benson was a surprise. From what Rick had said, Kate had expected Ross to be about the same age, to have roughly the same kind of appearance. As she put out her hand to meet his well-manicured fingers, she took in the slim, tightly muscled body, the expensive gray suit and the even more expensive tan, the clear gray eyes that complemented the beautifully cut gray hair. Ross Benson looked like he inhabited a different planet from the one Rick O'Malley lived in. Maybe success kept you young and sleek, she thought. People blamed hard work and stress for accelerating the aging process, but maybe that just happened when the hard work and stress took you nowhere, or to an obscure dead end like the one Rick had settled into.

"Please sit down," Ross invited. "Make yourself comfortable, Miss Sherwood," he said, indicating a beige couch. "Can we offer you some coffee?"

"Yes, thank you," she answered, glad for the chance to make her interview last for more than five minutes.

"I'm very grateful to you," Ross said, meeting her eyes with a warm, steady look.

"Really? Why?"

"Because I haven't heard from Rick O'Malley for almost ten years. It was just one of those things that happens. I'm sorry it did. Rick and I go back a lot of years. We managed to keep in touch, even if it was just drinks every couple of months. Then Rick's daughter died, I guess you know about that, and he just pulled back from everyone who knew him. When he called me about you, I twisted his arm and got him to accept a dinner invitation. So... I'm grateful to you for helping me to connect with Rick again."

Kate had not known about Rick's daughter. He had not mentioned a child, or for that matter, a family of any kind, any more than he had ever discussed with her how and why he had settled down into the editorship of the *Courier*. She felt a twinge of guilt for accepting all of Rick's kindnesses without thinking that he, too, might need something in return. She also felt admiration for Ross Benson, for a man who could care for another man, even when life took them in such obviously di-

verse directions. "I'm glad," she said. "I'm glad you found Rick again. He's a very special person."

"I know, Miss Sherwood. They don't come any better than Rick. No matter what mistakes he's made, Rick is one of the most decent people in this business. And, I might add, he had nothing but good things to say about you."

"Really?" Kate flushed with pleasure.

"He did. I'll tell you very frankly I would have seen you even if you were a complete washout, just because Rick asked. And I would have found you some work, somewhere, just because he asked. Rick knows that. He's not the kind of man who asks for favors. When he does . . . well, you know, it's for a special reason. He didn't need to give you the hard sell. But he did. Rick believes in you, Kate. May I call you Kate? He thinks you're the kind of favor that pays itself back. He told me you didn't have much experience, but he made me promise to look at your work. 'Really look,' he said. 'See past the clumsiness and the naiveté, Ross,' he said. 'My Kate has a lovely sensibility.' How could I resist an invitation like that?"

"I don't know what to say." Kate was moved almost to tears by Rick's efforts on her behalf.

"Don't say anything. Drink your coffee and let me have that portfolio you're holding so tightly."

Kate laughed at being caught out. She relinquished her precious samples and sat back on the sofa, trying not to fidget, as Ross put on a pair of reading glasses and started to examine her work.

After what seemed like hours, but was ten minutes by her watch, Ross looked at her. "I like your writing, Kate Sherwood. In fact, I think I like you. There's a warmth, a nice humanity in your pieces. Nothing sickeningly sweet, just something that touches the reader in the nicest way. The piece you did on the ninety-year-old Village poet—it's quite good. You're obviously a good listener. You ask good questions. And you don't show off."

"I don't know how," she admitted. "I don't know how to be stylish, so I just keep it plain. Rick taught me that."

"Stylish writers are as plentiful as gerbils. Some of them are exceptional, so they make it on style. It's more unusual to be a plain writer who isn't dull. It's what Rick calls your sensibility that makes your pieces work. You have a good story, and you let it grab the reader, instead of forcing him to admire your clever phrases or your elaborate metaphors. In this poet

story, you also resisted what would have been a great temptation to many writers. You could have made a real character out of him, made him the sum total of his eccentricities. But you didn't. There's a real sense of a whole person here, a person with a vivid and compelling history."

"Thank you," she said, not quite knowing how to handle such generous compliments from this important publisher.

"You're welcome. But that wasn't the point, really, of what I'm saying. I just wanted you to know your strengths, so you won't be tempted to polish them right out of your writing as you get better. And I'm certain you will get better. There are some rough patches in your work. Sometimes you use the same word when another would give variety. Keep a thesaurus on your desk, and you'll solve that problem easily. And sometimes you constrict the flow of your ideas because you try too hard for good English. When you have a little more confidence, you'll see it can be better to end with a dangling participle, to do things you've been taught never to do, just because it loosens up your prose and gives a better rhythm to your ideas. But basically I agree with Rick. You do have a lot of potential. What we'll have to do is find exactly where your particular talents can be best used."

"Thank you, Mr. Benson. I'll certainly appreciate any kind of work you can give me."

"You can thank Rick if you're going to thank anyone. I'm going to do something I don't usually do. I generally leave assignments to my editors; they're pretty touchy about their specific territories. But this first time, you'll be responsible directly to me. I want you to try one article for me. We have a department called *One Woman's Journal*. It uses first person pieces, sometimes from nonprofessionals, telling stories from personal experience. The women who write them aren't trying to be elegant or literary. They just want to present a story about something important that has happened to them. That's the place for you to start. So, what can you write about?"

"I don't know. I don't know about anything important that happened to me."

"Tell me more about yourself. Who are you, exactly?"

"I'm a mother. I have two children, Josh and Sarah. I'm trying to be a writer. I used to be a wife. And I used to be a teacher."

"And what do you think has been the most significant thing that happened to you recently?"

"I don't know. A lot of good things have happened to me. Meeting Rick. Working for him. Making new friends. It all happened after my husband and I separated."

"Fine. There we have it. Your personal story. The making of a single parent. There are lots of women out there trying to deal with the same realities you've been facing. We've run pieces on divorce. On the problems of step-parenting, that kind of thing. I think you can give the 'after-divorce' story a nice upbeat flavor. The divorce was your idea?"

"No. No, it wasn't."

"Perfect."

"Perfect? I wish I thought so."

"But that's the point, Kate. It wasn't your choice. Yet when I asked you to talk about new things in your life, you took on a very positive tone. That's going to be your story. Along with the pain and the problems you're going to discuss the good things. I think if you study the Journal format and work with it, we'll have a story that will touch a lot of readers."

"I'll try."

"Good. Let's say a month from now, you'll show me a finished piece—about two thousand words. We'll pay you one thousand dollars, on acceptance."

"My God." Kate was overwhelmed by the figure he mentioned.

"Never say that in front of management again, Kate. I can assure you that a thousand is far from our top rate. It's bottom, in fact, for a piece like this. So don't be so grateful. Just write a good piece, and we'll try to do better next time."

"I will, Mr. Benson. And thank you."

"I told you, thank Rick. And give him my best. Tell him he's not going to slip away again. Tell him I'm keeping you as a guarantee."

Kate delivered Ross's message, with all the embellishments of her own excitement. "Oh, Rick," she said. "He gave me an assignment, right on the spot. And he said he'd pay me a thousand dollars. Oh, Rick, just imagine, a thousand dollars!"

"And why not?" Rick said gruffly. "You'll be worth every penny."

"I wish I were sure about that. I'm supposed to write a journal about becoming a single parent. I've never done anything about me before."

"And now you'll start. You know the first rule of good

writing is to choose a subject you know. And you certainly know a thing or two about being a single parent."

"I do, don't I? I just never thought it would be worth anything to anyone else. Oh, Rick, I'm so excited. And I'm scared stiff. A thousand dollars. That's half a dollar a word. I don't know any half-dollar words."

"It's how you use them that makes them worth something, Kate. Not to mention the business of finding the right market. Ross wouldn't have given you the work if he didn't think you were worth it."

"Yes, he would have. He told me. He would have done it for you. In fact he did. Because you asked. He thinks you're special. Like I do."

Rick's face softened. "Ah, well, that's nice to hear. Ross Benson can do a thing or two for you, if he puts his mind to it. This is a good chance for you, Kate. Just try to keep your perspective, and you'll be all right. Don't be thinking of money while you do this. Just tell the story, the way you do for me, and you'll be fine. Don't try to show off for Ross. Some of the worst pieces I've ever seen come from writers who do that. They see the printed page as a personal stage, a chance to say, 'Look at me—see how clever and witty I am.' And their stories fail because few of them are as interesting as the material they submerge with all their fancy moves."

"That's funny, what you're saying. Ross told me to watch out for the same thing."

"Well, listen to him. He knows what he's talking about."

"I will. And Rick, don't mention this assignment to anyone. Please? I'm so afraid to jinx it. When it's done, if Ross likes it, then I'll tell. In fact, I'll have a party, and you'll be the guest of honor. Okay?"

"My lips are sealed. And if you want me to look at it, before you turn it in to Ross, I'll be glad to give you whatever help I can."

Kate started work on the piece at once. She tried to forget the money, the fact that it represented an opportunity that could change her life. She tried to pretend she was just telling the story of her separation and divorce to someone else facing the same problems.

She tried to think of the humor, the funny things you saw in retrospect after you got past the confusion and pain of certain

harsh realities. She described her experiences as instant liberation, comparing her new independence to the sink-or-swim situation faced by a child who has been thrown into deep water.

She wrote about the harsh financial realities that faced most women who found themselves suddenly mateless, about the stresses in finding a new place to live, in realigning family relationships when one of its members was, for all practical purposes, gone. She talked about her children, her friends, her work and the sturdy lifeline they had made for her.

She tried to describe, without self-pity or excessive gloom, the fears, the questions that came up, when the man you believed you'd be spending your life with just isn't there anymore. Like the question of whether or not there ever could be, or would be, someone else. And whether trust would ever be possible again.

As she wrote, she realized how far she had come since Harry's announcement, how, in fact, he had pushed her past her own comfortable dimensions, forcing her to develop strengths and capabilities she'd never had. She realized, too, how the children had grown, out of their own pain and disappointment. She theorized that children of divorce develop a new kind of sensitivity. When the cushioning security of the two-parent family disappears, it seemed to her that children, for better or for worse, are propelled into new patterns of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. They realize that adults are flawed and vulnerable and that life is filled with failed expectations and lost hopes.

As the pages piled up next to her typewriter, she reached for the memory of something that had happened months before, an experience that would make the perfect ending for the story she wanted to tell. It had happened on a Sunday morning. Her bedside phone had rung, waking her from a sound sleep. It had been Paul, inviting her to a Sunday brunch that had grown out of one of his late-night Saturday soirees.

"Do come, Kate," he had urged. "It would be fun for you. Lots of people and wonderful things to eat."

"I don't know," she said, tempted by the prospect of adult company and frivolous laughter. She had spent Saturday trying to add some bright, brave touches to the apartment. And she had winced when she'd had to turn down the kids' request for a Saturday night movie, because she couldn't spend fifteen dollars out of the twenty she had left to see her through till

Tuesday. Instead, she'd made popcorn, bought some candy bars from the corner deli, and they'd watched television until midnight.

It had been fun. Sort of. Yet when she'd put the children to bed, she'd had the feeling that she'd been whistling in the dark. Putting up a good front and wishing things were different.

So when Paul called the following morning, the temptation to take a break from reality was strong. But then she remembered Sarah and Josh. She couldn't just leave them alone in the apartment. It was their weekend, too. So she'd said: "I don't think so, Paul. I don't want to leave the kids alone here."

"Bring them along, love," he'd said promptly. "There's plenty of everything."

She'd reconsidered for a brief moment, then decided the children weren't quite ready to handle the scene at one of Paul's nonstop weekend parties. "No," she said. "I think we'll just spend the day together here. I think we all need that. But ask me again?"

"*Mais oui*. Of course. Have fun, love."

She'd fallen back to sleep, then wakened again to the sound of Josh and Sarah whispering in her doorway.

"I think Mommy feels bad today," Sarah was saying.

"Did she tell you?" Josh asked.

"No, silly. She got a telephone call, and I was listening. Somebody invited her to a party, and she said she couldn't go because she had to spend the day with us. I think she feels bad about it. She doesn't go to many nice things since Daddy went away."

"What are we going to do?" Josh asked.

"Well, for one thing, you can stop being such a crybaby every time she wants to go anywhere."

"I didn't mean it," Josh protested, his voice thickening with incipient tears. "I didn't mean to make her feel bad."

Kate's heart ached for her little boy, and she was torn between the need to get up and comfort him and her curiosity about their private thoughts. She kept her eyes closed and listened.

"It's okay," Sarah said, taking a more forgiving tone with her brother. "It's okay. Just don't do it anymore. You can sleep in my bed when Mommy goes out. Now you can help me do something nice for her. Let's make her breakfast in bed. And after, we can help her fix up the apartment. I don't want you

to say you liked our old house better when she says: 'Doesn't this look nice?'"

"But I do like our old house better."

"So do I, dummy. But we can't afford it anymore. And Mommy feels bad about it, too. She doesn't like this place so much either. But I heard her say we don't have the money to go anywhere else. So just keep quiet about it."

"Are we poor, Sarah? Did we get poor when Daddy went away?"

Sarah thought for a minute. "Well, we're not poor like those UNICEF kids we collect for. But we're a little bit poor compared to the regular children we know. Mommy says we won't always be poor if she can earn more money. Come on, now, you make some toast, and I'll scramble the eggs."

"Can't we have pancakes, Sarah? It's Sunday. Mommy always makes pancakes on Sunday."

"I don't know how to make pancakes, dopey, and neither do you. Stop being such a baby. This is for Mommy, I told you. Just beat the eggs, and don't say anything."

Kate had stayed in bed, pretending to be asleep, as she listened to the flurry of activity in the kitchen. She hugged to herself the secret knowledge of how wonderful and beautiful her children were. She swore she would never forget this day, that the memory of it would sustain her whenever she started to mourn the "somethings" that had been lost. This was the day that she knew the three of them would be all right. Flawed and human though they all might be, they cared for one another. This little enclave they called a family—it had lost a member, grieved and regrouped, and it would be all right.

When she finished her story, Kate proofed it for errors and hand delivered the copy to the receptionist at *Woman's Week*. She did not take Rick up on his offer of a second opinion. She had written it the only way she knew how, and if it was wrong, she didn't want to know. She left the verdict to Ross.

Since she was new to the ways of professional writing, Kate had no idea how long a verdict would be in coming. She tried not to think of what a thousand dollars would mean. Not only in terms of how many weeks she could stretch it, but also as a giant step toward ending her dependency on Harry. The money would buy her a little of the pride and integrity she couldn't quite afford now. And it would give her the luxury of indulging her children now and then.

She began to search the mail daily, for something that might be an official letter from *Woman's Week*, something other than the all-too-plentiful bills and junk mail. Rick had told her that a *yes* verdict usually brought an acceptance letter, either with a check enclosed, or with the promise of a check to follow. A *no*, he said, also brought a letter, usually a form letter, though she suspected Ross Benson might send her a nice note, explaining just why the answer was *no*.

She did not expect the telephone call that came to her home, one Thursday evening, just after dinner. "Kate Sherwood?" a man's voice inquired.

"Yes, this is Kate Sherwood."

"This is Ross Benson. From *Woman's Week*."

Her breath caught in her throat and she let out an audible gasp of surprise. "Oh," she said, "I didn't expect..."

"I know," he laughed, enjoying her reaction. "Publishers don't usually call new writers. Especially after hours. But you are Rick's protégée and this is a big occasion. Your first magazine sale, Kate. Congratulations."

She exhaled softly. "Oh, gosh. This is wonderful, Mr. Benson."

"Enjoy the moment," he said. "This will probably be the only time you'll feel that someone in publishing has given you a gift. If you persist in trying to make a living in this crazy business, I promise you'll soon stop feeling so grateful. So enjoy it right now."

"I will," she said fervently. "I will. I can't wait to tell my friends. In fact, I promised Rick I'd have a party to celebrate if this happened."

"I think I envy you this moment, Kate. One article more or less, it's not so much in the bigger scheme of things. But it's obviously made you very happy."

"It's a lot in my scheme of things. A thousand dollars is going to make a big difference in my life."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. Of course, it's important. And that brings me to the second reason for my call. I'd like to invite you to lunch. There's something I want to discuss with you."

"Is something wrong?" she asked hesitantly. "With the piece?"

"No, Kate," he laughed. "There are a few revisions I want you to make. Nothing major, I just didn't want to mention them before. But, no, this is something else. I assume you're

interested in more work. And that's what I wanted to discuss with you."

She tried to take in what he was saying, but she felt almost giddy with excitement, with the overwhelming intoxication of so much good news at once.

"The Algonquin, I think," he was saying. "That's a nice place to officially launch a new career, don't you think?"

"Yes," she said weakly. "Yes, I'd love that."

"Good. Let's make it next Wednesday. At one. I'll see you then."

A hundred ideas flew into her head at once. Phone calls she wanted to make. People to tell. Things to do. She started to dial, then put the phone down. She went into the children's room.

"Sarah . . . Josh," she called. "I've just had the best news. I sold my first story to a big magazine. Let's go out for ice cream sodas. And we'll have a movie, too. Anything you like."

"Oh, fun," Josh said, clapping his hands.

"But, Mommy," Sarah said, "it's a school night. How come you're letting us stay up on a school night?"

"Because this is special. Because special things don't come along that often. Because I want to share this with you first, before anyone else. And because it's good to break rules sometimes," she added, thinking how nice it was to play this kind of role for a change.

The following morning, she couldn't wait to tell Rick her good news. "I did it," she said, the minute she saw his burly frame lumbering through the front door of the *Courier*. "I did it," she said, throwing her arms around him. "They bought the story. Ross called me last night. They actually bought my story. And it wouldn't have happened without you. Remember I said I'd have a party? Well, I'm paying up. Next Saturday night. And you're the guest of honor. And don't you dare say I don't have to do it," she warned, seeing the look on his face. "I want to. I want all the people I love to be there. It's a special occasion, and it won't be nearly as special if I can't share it with my friends."

"All right, Kate," he said gruffly, in the way he did when he was feeling emotional. "I'll be there. And congratulations." He kissed the top of her head and squeezed her shoulder. "Now can we get to work?"

Kate went through the motions of a normal work day, feeling

like the world was hers, at least for a little while. In between her routine duties, she made phone calls to Paul and Margo, under Rick's mock-disapproving eye. She started to make lists of things to do. She wanted the party to be festive, but not ridiculously expensive.

She would make her special chili, she decided. With some rice and salad. And champagne. The New York State stuff her neighborhood liquor store was always running specials on.

Impulsively she called Myra Hatfield and asked if it would be all right to invite the women in her group. They had all listened patiently to her downs. She thought it was only appropriate to let them in on an upward turn of events. Myra said it wasn't usual, but she had no objections.

Kate's phone calls to her group-mates brought enthusiastic acceptances from all but Rose, who wished her well but said it would be difficult to get someone to watch her child. Kate wondered for a minute if that was really true or if maybe Rose, for whatever reasons, had simply bound herself, hand and foot, to her retarded child and shut herself off from any possibility of a normal life. She reminded herself to bring the question up, gently, at the next regular group session.

When she had finished telephoning, she went back to her list-making. The first order of business was to clean the place up. She'd enlist the kids' help in really making the apartment shine. Margo had promised to bring lots of flowers. "I know you can't lay out money for something like flowers, Kate, and they make a party so festive. Let that be my contribution."

"Okay," Kate had agreed, liking the idea of serving chili and champagne to people she liked, in an atmosphere of candles and flowers.

She finished the day in a mood of pleasurable anticipation. A large check was on its way. Next week there was lunch with Ross Benson and the promise of more money. And Saturday night, she was having her first big party since Harry. All of this seemed to indicate a very definite shift in her fortunes. If only I were in love, she mused, and then immediately stopped herself, before the thought became a full-blown fantasy. To want more now would be like tempting fate. And Kate was not about to do that.

## Chapter 15

KATE checked her appearance in the mirror, satisfied herself that she and her apartment were looking as good as they were going to look and sat down to wait for her guests. The children were in their room, laughing and talking, in anticipation of the evening ahead. They had helped dust and vacuum without complaint, satisfied with Kate's promise that they could stay up as late as they liked.

Kate had enjoyed the day. There had been none of the pre-party nerves that had often preceded the entertaining she did for Harry. She had washed all her wedding china and the good glasses that had survived children and parties and clumsy movers. Then she had spent a pleasant hour arranging the masses of flowers that Margo had sent. She selected some favorite records for the stereo and put her cut-rate champagne in the refrigerator to chill. On impulse, she whipped up a batch of Middle-Eastern pastries, thick with nuts and dripping with rich honey syrup, to serve later with heavy Turkish coffee. It would be an eclectic meal, just like her guest list.

As she lit the dozens of candles she had bought for the occasion, the doorbell signaled the arrival of her first guest. It was Paul, dressed in an antique black suit, looking very much like an incarnation of Heathcliff. He kissed her warmly on both cheeks and presented her with a bottle of vintage Dom Perignon.

"How elegant you look," she said. "And this champagne—I'm embarrassed to show you what I was planning to serve."

"*Mais non, chérie*—this bottle is for you, not for the common herd. Squirrel it away for a special tête-à-tête. And I will drink whatever you put before me, just so I can use it to make a toast to you."

"Ah, Paul, you always say the right thing."

"Of course. My exquisite manners are matched only by my exquisite taste. Especially in friends, Madame Sherwood. Tell me, love, it hasn't been a year yet, but how is our bet going?"

"What bet?"

"The one that ends with you telling me you're ecstatic beyond belief with your new life. Then you say you wouldn't have the old one back even if the good fairy—no joke intended, dearest—gave it to you, all tied up in a silver ribbon."

"Oh, that bet." Kate laughed. "I'm not ready to either win or lose yet. But I'll tell you one thing—you and all the people coming here tonight, you're all responsible for all the happiness I've had..."

"Please, Kate—that sounds like an Academy Award speech: 'I want to thank anyone I've ever known for making this wonderful evening possible...'"

"Come on, Paul, let me indulge in a little honest sentiment, even if it does embarrass you. I'm just saying 'thank you,' that's all."

"Well, in that case, I'll allow it. Now do let me have a drink or a morsel of food. I realized I haven't ingested a single thing this entire day."

"Here, have some raw veggies. So that's your secret for all that stylish emaciation, and I thought it was all genes and bone structure."

"Of course, it's bone structure to begin with, my dear. Look at this profile." He turned to be admired. "But it's also art. My art. It's more important than food or sex or any of those mundane carnal concerns. When I'm working on something new, something that excites me, I quite forget about everything else."

"I'm impressed, Paul. In fact, I'm awed."

"And so you should be, my dear. *That* is what sets me apart from the crowd—the inescapable reality that I am more than just a pretty face. And speaking of crowds, who else have you invited to celebrate this triumph of yours?"

"Everyone I like. Your old friend, Rick, my good friend Margo—she's dying to meet you..."

"Naturally."

"I want you to be nice to her. She's beautiful and stylish, and she's not just a pretty face either. I want you two to like each other because I love you both. And you'll also meet the women from my group..."

He groaned. "Dear Kate—you haven't—tell me you haven't planned a therapeutic soiree—a ritual baring of souls—a Freudian *Walpurgisnacht*. Dear God, Kate, I had hoped for something much more superficial, some idle cocktail party chatter perhaps. Certainly not an evening of women airing their dreary concerns . . ."

"They aren't dreary, and no one is going to bare any souls."

"What do they do, these women of yours? Does anyone do anything I'd be interested in?"

"I'll leave that to you to find out in your own inimitable way. You'll probably like Ellen Hirschorn. She teaches acting—*that* should interest you."

"Yes, that sounds promising. At least Ellen Hirschorn does—I've heard the name. All right, I forgive you for inviting your sisters in angst. But remember . . ."

The doorbell rang again. Margo, Mario and Janine had arrived together. Kate made the introductions and handed Margo over to Paul, with a meaningful nudge and a reminder that he was talking to her best friend.

She went into the kitchen to check on the huge pot of chili that had been simmering since early morning. She inhaled the pungent aroma, took a tiny taste, nodded with satisfaction and replaced the cover. The bell rang again, and she called the children to take charge of the new arrivals. She took a tray of cheese puffs and miniature quiches from the oven. As she arranged them on a doily-covered platter, she heard the sounds of more people, more introductions, then suddenly, a cry of "Daddy" from Josh—and an interruption in the hum of the conversation.

She went quickly to the door. "Hello, Harry," she said as coolly and calmly as she could, fighting the surge of resentment that flooded through her. Harry was the last person in the world she wanted to see. He was the one person who had the power, still, to spoil the new and fragile sense of well-being she felt. "I didn't expect you today," she said, trying to make her words sound like a question, rather than the accusation they really were.

His face twisted into the sour-lemon look that had always made her apprehensive. "Laurie and I just came back from the beach. I bought some things for the kids, and I wanted to drop them off." He made no apology for barging in unannounced. He spoke with the assurance that he had every right to be annoyed because she and "the kids" were otherwise engaged.

Kate did not apologize either. Nor did she step aside to let him in. Maybe her backbone came from the fact she was surrounded by friends. Or perhaps it came from the little success she'd just had at *Woman's Week*. "I'm sorry I can't invite you in," she said, "but as you can see, I have a lot of company."

"Developing a taste for entertaining, are you?" he said, in a tone that might have been nasty, ironic or merely curious.

"Actually," she said, hating herself for feeling she had to explain anything to him, "this is the first time since we moved. I'm celebrating my first article in *Woman's Week*."

His eyebrows lifted. "Well, well," he said in that same tone. "Little Kate is certainly getting up in the world. I never dreamed you had all these hidden talents."

Suddenly Kate understood what was behind Harry's reaction. He was jealous. He didn't like it at all that she was doing what she was doing. He would have been happy enough to see her teaching. Or plugging away at some routine office job, just making enough to sustain a plain, no-frills existence. But he didn't like it that she was finally beginning, after he had left her, to *do something*.

As she understood this, she smiled, feeling more in control of the situation. "I have you to thank, Harry, for making it all possible." She said this sweetly, and with a little malice, knowing how much Harry would hate it if those words were actually true.

He scowled a response, and she was afraid she had gone too far. Then Paul materialized at her side. "Hello, Harry," he said. "I know you must be as proud of Kate as I am. And I know you have to rush off now, but let's have lunch next week. I have a lot to discuss with you about my plans for the fall."

Harry mumbled a good-bye, handed over the packages he'd brought for the children and left. Kate turned to Paul. "Thank you," she said. "Thanks for helping me handle that."

## Chapter 16

ELLEN opened her eyes and blinked against the morning sun. Happy Anniversary, she said to herself. Today would have marked...how many years of marriage to Noah? Too many to dwell upon, and she blocked the numbers from her mind.

Instead she looked at the sleeping man beside her. His was a pretty face, with soft, flawless golden-beige skin. It was an actor's face—the tan from a sunlamp, the brown-blond hair bottle-streaked—but lovely to look at, all the same.

Blake Winslow, né Pasquale Bevilacqua, had been sharing her bed on-and-off for several weeks now, something of a record since her separation from Noah. She had bedded an impressive number of men since Noah. The experience had been both enlightening and exhilarating.

Ellen Hirschorn had never been one of the world's great beauties. But she had something, a presence, that attracted men. That *something* she had once decided was simply the fact that she liked them. A lot. Not to the exclusion of women. Not better than women. She just liked them, responded to them with a frank and open and uncomplicated sexuality. The liking and loving and bedding of men had become almost an avocation with her, one she pursued with the same enthusiasm and curiosity she brought to her work.

Unlike so many women of her generation, Ellen had never felt the need to name her priorities or to choose her loyalties. She had simply played whatever cards she held with integrity and style. Her blunt honesty was sometimes disarming, sometimes unsettling, but eventually it put people at ease, giving them a sense that there was nothing to fear, no hidden agenda. Men seemed to sense Ellen's acceptance of them as they were.

With her, they relaxed from the need to be better than they were.

She had defended her position to the group more than once. "I don't understand," she had said, "when a woman says she loves a man and then sets up a whole bunch of conditions. Is she really saying she loves him, or does she really like the idea of taking on some rehabilitation project? It seems to me that it would be a lot more sensible to find someone she can accept just the way he is. I know I'd resent it if a man said he loved me, and then told me all the ways he expected me to change."

Her attitude attracted many eager lovers, some transient, some who wanted to stay awhile. Yet no matter who shared her bed, there was still only one man she dreamed of. Her love for Rod Chapman, secret and unfulfilled, was always there, no matter who held her close, whispering words of tenderness or passion, stroking her body before she fell asleep.

She never encouraged those who wanted to attach, to make the kind of ties that would make her responsible for their well-being. The years with Noah had taught her that responsibilities of that kind were not lightly put aside.

Even now, she made regular visits to the loft she had shared with Noah, fussing over his health, mother-henning him into paying attention to his diet, his laundry, his bills. She still listened to his fantasy projects, trying to bring him down to earth without bruising his hopes or damaging his dreams.

Now Blake was asking to move in with her. "Why not?" he had asked last night, after they had made love. "It would be fun, don't you think? I promise I won't make extra work for you. In fact," he had teased, casting a meaningful glance at the rampant clutter of the bedroom, "I could probably make some things easier." It was true that Blake was certainly tidy. His apartment, though smaller than the sublet she had taken over from an actress who was working on the west coast, was a model of organization and efficiency.

It could be fun, she conceded, to live with a man who pulled his own weight. For a while at least. She wasn't even halfway in love with Blake, but she did enjoy his company. He was great to look at, capable in bed, and they could talk shop together. Maybe.

This morning, life seemed full of interesting maybes. She was in rehearsal for a showcase production of *Mrs. Dally Has a Lover*. The exposure would be good, just what she needed to remind producers that she was an actress, and not just a

good teacher. Her bank account was comfortably full, from a job she'd just finished as dialogue coach on a feature film. She no longer had to support Noah in his ventures, though she still slipped a few dollars in the teapot when she went to see him.

Blake would be a new kind of experience. He worked regularly, mainly in commercials and an occasional soap-opera role, but he earned a good living. He was ambitious in a businesslike, practical way. He would do well, Ellen guessed.

He had an audition for a wine commercial this afternoon. He would probably get it, she thought. He could look very elegant, very European.

He would sleep another hour or so. Then he would get up, drink a glass of hot water with lemon, do fifteen minutes of exercise before he had a light meal of yogurt, lettuce and cucumber, dressed with rice vinegar and cold-pressed sesame oil, and herb tea. Then he'd go off and give a very professional reading. Blake was one of the few actors she knew who had mastered his own insecurities and anxieties. He exuded an air of quiet control, total professionalism. A narcissist, she thought affectionately, but weren't they all.

After she had her own breakfast of black coffee and toast, she wrote him a note: "Off to rehearsal. Back this afternoon. Call me after your audition. Ellen."

As she came out of the small storefront theater, Ellen put on her aviator sunglasses and walked to the curb to hail a cab. No, she thought. She was restless and the weather was nice. She would walk awhile.

The rehearsal had gone reasonably well, but she had been jumpy, unrelaxed, her concentration erratic. Since she had left Noah, she had started to feel a new kind of pressure whenever she worked. Now that she could no longer lay her frustrations on his doorstep, it was all on her, the burden of her ambitions, the possibility of failure, the dream that had begun when she was just a little girl.

She had nourished the ambition and the dream with stories in movie magazines, stories of success and happiness. As she got older, she fed on newspaper items about Barbra Streisand and Bette Midler, little Jewish girls from nowhere who started with a little something special and a big hunger and made magic. She had those things, she knew it, the hunger and the something special.

She knew about make-believe, knew how to feel it so strongly

that she could make other people feel it, too—the magic that was better than real life, bigger, clearer and more compelling. She had learned the techniques, the refinements, but the spark was still strong inside her.

She had never doubted she was good, but now that she was on her own, she had begun to worry that *good* might not be enough. She had been around awhile, and there was a danger in that. If she didn't get the chance to do something important soon, she might find herself permanently cast as a minor character. If your résumé said that no one had taken a chance with you, the chances were good that no one would.

She quickened her pace as she cut across the theater district and over to Eighth Avenue, where the legitimate theaters gave way to the porno houses and massage parlors. Suddenly she started to laugh. Sandwiched in between a delicatessen and an out-of-business cigar store, a big hand-painted sign in bold shades of red and green proclaimed GUCCI. In smaller letters, the words PSYCHIC - PALMIST - CARDS followed. A fortune-teller with a sense of humor? Ellen couldn't resist the impulse to find out.

Inside the tiny shop the furnishings were simple: a card table covered with a black cloth, two folding chairs, a pair of pastoral landscapes in gilt frames hanging on the plastic paneled walls. No crystal ball, no particular atmosphere, just the scent of jasmine incense. Ellen was disappointed. She had expected something a little more showbiz.

She was about to leave when the flower-printed curtains at the back parted and a heavyset woman in a black dress appeared. She was about fifty, her black hair pulled into a thick chignon, her face powdered to a theatrical pallor, her lips vivid with shiny red lipstick. "Welcome," she said in a deep near-baritone.

"Hi," Ellen said. This fortune-teller looks like Aunt Irene, she thought.

"Sit down, please. Will you have a complete reading, cards and palm?"

"How much?"

"Five dollars."

"Sure, let's do the whole thing."

"Give me your hand. Ah, a very long life line, you will live to a very old age. And love, your love line"—she pointed—"it travels all the way to the end. There is love in your life and there will be until you die. You have a break here." She tapped

a furrow in the palm. "A big change in your life..."

"Yes," Ellen affirmed.

"Difficult times, but they will be better. You will love again and it will last."

Ellen's heart thumped. Rod. The fortune-teller must mean Rod.

"You are an artist of some kind."

"Well... yes." She had never quite seen herself as an *artist*. That seemed to be farther down the road, along with recognition and success.

The woman smiled into Ellen's hand. "You will have much success, much money."

Ellen smiled back. That was something to hold onto.

When the palm reading was finished, the woman took out the tarot cards and asked Ellen to shuffle and cut the deck. The cards appeared to confirm the fortune-teller's previous predictions, for success and love.

"Is there something you want to wish?"

Ellen didn't hesitate, not with the image of Rod so clear in her mind. "Yes."

"Close your eyes and concentrate. Make your wish." She laid the cards out again and inspected them. "You'll have your wish. For just a moment in time. But it will be a moment that changes your life."

Ellen pondered the prophecy for a moment. "Can I ask a question? About a man?"

"Hold the question in your heart." As she began to lay out the cards, the woman shook her head. "No," she said, "no, I don't like this. Not at all. I see pain and disappointment. Another woman. No," she repeated, "you must get rid of this man. Forget him."

Now Ellen was confused. Forget whom? Not Rod, she wouldn't even consider that. Noah? Maybe it was Blake, but she wouldn't ask any more questions, questions that might have answers she didn't want to hear.

After she left the storefront, she didn't feel like walking anymore, and she looked for the nearest bus stop. She waited a few minutes and thought: what the hell, a cab would be nice, and I deserve it after all those years of supporting Noah's pretensions. She hailed the first Checker cab that came along. She liked the big cars that allowed her to stretch out and ride in comfort.

"Nice day," the driver observed.

"It's okay," she answered absently, looking out the window. The sun was out.

"Playing hooky from work?"

"No. I never play hooky from work. I'm just . . . in transit." She liked that idea.

He turned around when the light turned red, and she saw that he was young, about twenty-five, and very attractive. Male ingenue, she typecast. Very good for Noel Coward revivals.

"Aren't you Ellen Hirschorn?" he asked.

"Yes. Have we met?"

"I saw you work in the Sam Shepard play. You were terrific. You really know what it's all about. I'm an actor, too, when I'm not driving this cab."

"Thanks. It's nice to hear words like that."

"You must hear them all the time," he said, pulling away as the light changed.

"Not nearly enough," she laughed. "But if you're an actor, you know that, don't you?"

"Yeah." He laughed, too. "If I heard it a lot, I wouldn't be driving a cab. But I have to earn a living while I'm waiting for it to happen. When I started taking acting classes, I remember one night when Alan Alda came to talk to the group. He said that he had done it all, been a doorman, driven a cab, everything that all of us were doing. He said it was important to be able to support yourself, so you could keep your self-respect and your sanity when you couldn't get any acting jobs. That made sense to me. I've done a lot of different things, but I like driving a cab. The hours are flexible, so I can audition. And besides," he finished, "I get to meet a lot of interesting people. Like you."

"Well, thanks again."

"You're welcome. And by the way, my name is Jim—Jim Preston." As he brought the cab to a stop in front of her building, he said: "Look, would it be all right if I called you sometime? We could have a drink or something . . ."

"Sure," she answered, handing him her card, along with the fare and a decent tip—and thinking that the "or something" might be the most interesting part of an evening spent with Jim Preston.

When she let herself into the apartment, she still felt restless, unsettled. There was no sense of home in this place where she lived now. The furnishings were tastefully modern and the colors well-coordinated in autumn shades of rust and beige and

brown. But they had all been chosen by someone else, personalized by someone else. For Ellen, this very pleasant one-bedroom apartment said *temporary*. And she realized that her parents' apartment in Brooklyn was the only real home she had known.

She had felt for a long time that *forever* with Noah would be like a prison sentence, and whatever homemaking she had done in Noah's loft had reflected that feeling. Her contributions to their living space had been functional and disinterested. Noah was no great shakes as a nest-builder either, but she had left that job to him anyway, reasoning that if he couldn't earn a living, he might as well do something useful.

Now she thought that she might have made a mistake, depriving herself of the simple amenities of life, the comfort and shelter of a home that was warm and welcoming. So much of her life had been lived helter-skelter, on the run, from auditions to appointments to acting classes. Here she was, halfway through that life, still without anything or anyone special she could call her own.

She sat down on the sublet bed in the sublet apartment, noticing the dust balls (city tumbleweed, she called them) that collected around the furniture and in the corners. She ran her hand absently along the thick beige down quilt, closed her eyes and tried to imagine what kind of luxuries she would buy if she had lots of money and a choice of how to spend it.

A car and a driver—it would be nice to put subways and buses in the past. Maybe a big, outrageous fur coat to wear over her fatigues, her jumpsuits and her jeans. A maid would be good, someone who would take care of the dust balls and the laundry and all the chores that Ellen had never quite learned to do well.

It was a small list, actually, her catalog of fantasy luxuries for the future, whenever that rolled around. But there must be something she could do today, something she could afford. To mark this transition.

Okay, she resolved, getting up from the bed and heading for the shower. Today she would shop, like other women did. Today she would think of at least three ways to pamper herself.

She ran under the shower quickly, to freshen up and to rinse off some of the morning's fatigue, then dressed quickly in the same khaki jumpsuit.

Twenty minutes later, she was in the linen department at Macy's, paying for a set of cream-colored satin sheets and pillowcases. Her next purchase was a white silk jumpsuit, followed by a pair of crushed leather boots the color of vanilla ice cream.

As she was getting ready to leave the store, she stopped at one of the cosmetic counters on the main floor. A white-jacketed cosmetician was giving a facial to a woman reclining in a cushioned chaise. That looks like fun, she thought. I've never had anything professional done to me, she realized, not unless you counted a haircut every two months. Or those hair-straightening sessions in Angie Donatelli's kitchen in Brooklyn, back in the days when hair that resembled Brillo was considered very un-pretty.

"Can I get one of those now?" she asked the woman.

"Certainly. Just take a seat and I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Stretched horizontal on the black imitation leather recliner, Ellen relaxed to the touch of cool fingers working coconut-scented cream into her skin, cleansing it, tissing, closing the pores with lime-fragranced astringent. The fingers massaged her temples and cheeks, working their way down to her neck. Heated collagen in a soft paraffin base was applied to her face and left to harden.

When it was removed and the hands had finished their ministrations, Ellen was given a mirror. Her skin was smooth and clear, her olive complexion lightly blushed with a natural rosiness.

"Do you want some makeup?" the woman asked.

"No... wait... yes." Today she would step out of character. And although she was an expert in the art of makeup, she did not interfere as the cosmetician poked through the pots of cheek color and lip glosser, choosing clear Chinese reds. Around the eyes, she applied a shadow of silvered jet, liner and mascara of midnight black.

Ellen looked in the mirror again, and the image was startlingly dramatic. It was Ellen Hirschorn, all right, only much more so.

Feeling as if she had already taken a couple of steps in a new direction, she stopped to buy a half dozen bunches of flowers before she went home.

She divided the flowers—carnations and daisies and miniature roses—between the bedroom and the living room. By the time she had put the satin sheets on the bed, her mood had shifted to one of festive anticipation.

And by the time Blake arrived, she had enjoyed a long, luxurious soak in the bathtub, perfumed her body and put on her new clothes. Although she rarely wore jewelry of any kind, tonight she had dug out a wide African-style ebony cuff and a pair of enormous onyx hoop earrings.

"Wow!" Blake exclaimed when he saw her, forgetting his usual stage diction. "What's happening here?"

"My anniversary. Major transitions."

"What anniversary?"

"Mine and Noah's. And don't look bewildered, Blake. What we have here is the end of the first act. Curtain. Intermission is over. Tonight, it's Act two, Scene one. Got it?"

"Whatever you say, coach. I don't know what your script is like, but I can tell you that the leading lady is the best. And the costume's a smash."

"Thanks. And we're not using a script, not tonight. We're going to improvise."

"I like that. How would you like to go to Elaine's? There's going to be a big crowd from the coast there. You want to show off the new Ellen Hirschorn?"

"No, not that way. No hustling, no business, no look-sees tonight. Just fun. How about an old-fashioned bacchanal? An orgy of fun."

"I know just the place. The Palace, downtown. We can drink and dance until tomorrow. There's a good funky crowd, and nobody ever goes home."

"Funky? That sounds perfect. Let's go."

But when they arrived at the Palace, Ellen looked around through the semi-opaque darkness and whispered to Blake: "This looks more like Happy Halloween than Happy Anniversary to me."

"This is it, Ellen, this is now in the music business—unless you want to go to the Rainbow Room and dance to old Cole Porter songs."

"Cole Porter ain't chopped liver, Blake darling, especially compared with this crowd. Everybody here looks prepubescent and very, very strange."

"Prepubescent is very, very hot today, even in our business. Haven't you noticed? Some days I feel as if I'm practically

ready for character parts," he said, as they settled themselves at a small table.

"Stop," she ordered. "I'm still a growing girl. I don't want to hear about character parts."

"Hey, I wasn't talking about you. I told you before, you look great," he said smoothly, though she noticed that he was in fact looking over her shoulder, scanning the crowd for faces he might recognize.

"Thanks," she said dryly. "By the way, you never told me how the call-back went."

He snapped back to attention. "I got it. You bring me luck, Ellen. Do you realize that I've gotten every job I've gone for since I met you? That's incredible—even my agent can't believe it. Just yesterday he said to me: 'Blake, whatever you're doing, keep doing it.'"

"Good advice, but luck ain't got anything to do with it, Blake. People are just starting to pay attention to that adorable *punim* of yours."

"Nope. I insist, it's you. And I want to show my appreciation. Shall we celebrate your anniversary with some champagne?"

"Champagne makes me sneeze. I'll have a Stolichnaya on the rocks."

"I didn't know you drank vodka."

"I don't. I heard somebody order it the other day, and I liked the sound of it. A Garbo sound."

"Let's dance," Blake suggested, after they had ordered their drinks.

"Might as well," she agreed.

He danced as well as she might have expected, better even. And he was easily one of the prettiest faces on the floor. So why wasn't she jumping at his offer of a live-in arrangement?

When they returned to her place, Ellen's mood was a little anticlimactic. Earlier she had envisioned a celebratory night of passionate play in her newly satined bed. Now she had a slight headache from vodka and cigarette smoke and a resonating throb in her temples from the heavily amplified bass sounds they had listened to for the past few hours.

Blake clearly had similar plans for bedtime games, for he excused himself to use her bathroom, and when he returned, she caught the scent of mouthwash on his breath. Good old

Blake, she smiled to herself, always with the right moves for the right moments.

And he was in fine form tonight. "Come here," he whispered huskily, as he started to undo the buttons on her jumpsuit. Take One, she thought. Leading man goes into action.

But when he pushed her onto the bed, her nearly naked body slid across the mattress, and she had to grab the headboard to keep from falling off. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Although she knew that Blake did not do comedy in bed, she found it hard to get seriously in the mood.

But Blake persisted. He kissed like an angel, and his hands were like butterfly wings as they traveled along her spinal column, down her thighs, up the inside of her legs. Instinctively he touched her *there*, the spot that threw her female hormones into high gear. She sighed appreciatively and reached for him, savoring the feel of his flat belly, the firmness of his legs. Hungrily she took him in her mouth, teasing him with her lips, her tongue until he was hard. Straddling his body, she guided him inside her, rocking against him until her skin beaded with sweat and her breath started to come in short irregular gasps. Quickly he rolled over her, thrusting fast and hard until she heard the sound of her own voice crying out with pleasure.

Later she whispered in his ear, "That was so nice, Blake, you're fabulous." With Blake, she always felt she had to throw in a little extra applause in case her blissful sighs and orgasmic shudders weren't enough, so that he would come back for his curtain calls. But she meant every word. She did appreciate him. After Noah, it was easy to appreciate a man who was physically attractive, who had both the energy and the inclination to function, in bed and out.

Blake was easily the best in her recent sexual renaissance, and he had helped her decide unequivocally that she wasn't ever going to do without again. "Sex," she whispered to the sleeping man beside her, "is just like a good backhand. Use it or lose it." And she wasn't going to lose it, not ever again. She smiled at the strength of that resolution.

Yet as she started to drift off to sleep, she asked herself if a man like Blake was enough for a grown-up woman. If she wouldn't end up needing an awful lot of Blakes in the years to come.

She punched up the pillow and tried to find a comfortable position, but her head kept sliding on the slippery surface. The

satin sheets would have to go. She didn't have the energy for all this slipping and sliding. Back to the white percale sheets her mother had given her when she married Noah. Tomorrow. And she would wash off the gunk on her face, stuff that was probably even now clogging her pores. One more thing—she would talk to Blake, try to put him off for a while.

He could become a habit, just like Noah. There wasn't enough here for a real relationship. Maybe she would never have that, not as long as she cherished her fantasies of a man who was far away. But until her head and her heart told her that she had something real, she would have to make do with sex on the run, just as so many other people did. She wouldn't trade a headache for an upset stomach. Tomorrow, she would tell Blake.

He turned in his sleep and reached an arm across her breasts. Her nipples stiffened and she wondered if Blake could manage an encore right now. She bent over his sleeping body and took his earlobe between her teeth, while her fingernails traced a downward path from his chest. Well, she thought, as he opened his eyes and smiled up at her, maybe she didn't have to talk to Blake tomorrow. When he pressed her for an answer, that would be soon enough.

The following evening, as she took her place among the group, Ellen spoke: "Look, everybody, I want you all to do me a favor."

Everyone looked expectantly in her direction.

"I want you to listen to a piece of tape from my answering machine. It's my friend Blake."

"What are we listening for?" Kate asked.

"Oh, I don't know. He wants to move in with me. Yesterday I was thinking maybe. Last night I was thinking no. Today I'm back to maybe and I don't have any good reason for it. There's nothing wrong with Blake. He's pretty and he's great in the sack and that's about it. But maybe that's nothing to sneeze at. I don't know. Maybe if you guys listen to the tape, you can get some kind of impression, you know, instant character analysis. I can usually do that, when I'm working, but now that I'm involved with Blake, it's hard to be totally professional."

"You expect us to give you advice from a voice tape?" Kate teased. "If any of us were that smart, we wouldn't be here."

"Ah, come on, guys," Ellen said. "Give me a break—just

listen up." She flipped the PLAY switch on her small machine.

"Hello, Ellen," said a man's voice with a vaguely English, stage-trained quality. "I'm thinking about you . . . sorry we can't be together tonight, but I'm hoping you've been thinking about being my roommate . . . I'll call you in the morning . . . bye for now . . ."

The voice trailed off, lower and more seductive.

"Well?" Ellen demanded.

"Well, what?" Kate countered. "What do you want us to say?"

"Oh, I don't know. Does he sound sincere?"

"Sincere?" Kate laughed. "That sounds like those personal columns in the newspapers: 'Sincere single woman seeking sincere man. Object: matrimony.'"

"No, no," Ellen joined the laughter. "Nothing like that. It's just that Blake is the nicest man to come along since I left Noah. I know I don't want *matrimony* with him. But the thing is I don't know what to do with him. I like having him around, but I don't want to get tangled up in something that could get messy . . ."

"Just in case anyone cares what I think," Wendy snapped, "this is the tackiest thing that's happened in this group. A guy calls to leave a message, a private message, and all of a sudden he's part of a group activity like a bug under a microscope. How do you think he'd feel if he knew what was going on?"

Ellen flinched visibly as Wendy was speaking. "I didn't mean it that way," she said quietly. "I didn't even think of it that way. It's just that I'm used to listening to voice tapes in my business. They're like pictures and résumés. But maybe you're right . . . maybe I shouldn't have . . ."

"It's not so bad," Janine said soothingly. "You didn't mean to do anything bad. In my day, we took a young man to meet our family and friends, and they would tell us what they thought of him. That's all you wanted to do here, isn't it?"

"She's right," Margo agreed. "There's nothing so terribly private or personal on that tape. In any case," she said, looking pointedly at Wendy, "the man's an actor; he's accustomed to all kinds of scrutiny. But what I wonder now," she said, speaking to Ellen again, "is why you're so guarded? You say the man's attractive and a good lover. I don't know about *sincere*, but I would say he sounds quite interested in you. Why won't you give this relationship a chance to develop? You gave so relentlessly with Noah. Why won't you let Blake get a little

closer to you? See what he has to give? You might be pleasantly surprised. . . .”

Ellen was quiet. She thought she knew the answers to those questions. But she wasn't willing to share that part of herself with her friends. Not with anyone in this city, this state or this world in which she carried on her daily life.

The sense of unease and unsettlement stayed with Ellen all through the following day. It had broken her concentration during rehearsal, and that in turn had made her angry with herself. She took her work seriously, much more seriously than she took herself, and she became impatient when the refuse from her personal life slopped over and compromised her professionalism.

She came home in a downbeat mood, and she knew she would have to shake it before Blake came by. He'd wangled an invitation to a cocktail party at Sardi's, a party whose guest list included half a dozen well-known actors and at least as many producers and directors. He'd expect her to be up and confident—and knowing that made upness elude her.

The telephone rang and she reached for it automatically. “Hello?” she answered without enthusiasm.

“Hi,” a man's voice said. “I told you I'd call soon and here I am.”

She searched her memory, trying to find a face and a name to match the voice. She was usually very good at this, but now she just drew a blank. The voice was youngish, bright, fresh. Suddenly she remembered the cab driver-actor. Of course. “Well, good for you,” she wisecracked.

“So how have you been? Tell me about your day.”

“So what do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“It's the pits. Rehearsal was lousy and I have a solid case of the crankies. How are you?”

There was a long hesitation. “Wait a minute,” the voice said. “Is this Jane?”

“No. Aren't you my cab driver?”

The man laughed. “Sorry. I guess Ma Bell crossed her wires.”

She laughed, too. “Does this mean you don't want to hear any more about my day?”

“That sounds tempting, but I think I'd better call Jane.”

She gave a theatrical sigh. “Lucky Jane.” She hung up

wishing for a moment that she had taken the cab driver's number. No, she sighed again, this time for real. Another phone number wasn't going to make any difference in the scheme of things. The cab driver probably wasn't any more interesting than Blake. Most actors just weren't that substantial without a script in their hands.

She hadn't known Blake for very long, and she had given some thought to Margo's advice about letting the relationship develop, but she had the feeling there wasn't going to be that much more, that soon they would be going into reruns. And maybe that wasn't all Blake's fault. It was true that he was self-involved, career-oriented and not terribly bright. Yes, he had his moments of sweetness. But he wasn't Rod Chapman. No one else was. And maybe that was the single most important thing that was wrong with him.

By the time she and Blake were on their way to Sardi's, she had psyched herself into a reasonably even mood. She had dressed up in deference to his elegant blue suit and to the fact that she would be meeting a lot of people that might do her career some good.

But as they arrived at the West Forty-fourth Street entrance and entered the elevator that would take them to the private Belasco Room upstairs, she began to feel uncertain, out of her depth. As confident as she was of her professional abilities, Ellen never had the sense that she could sell herself well, in spite of the brash bravado she affected. She started to wisecrack, not wanting Blake to see her vulnerabilities, and then she stopped, thinking, what the hell, why shouldn't he know that she was a little nervous.

"This kind of thing isn't so easy for me, Blake. I think I'm getting stage fright."

He looked at her, disbelieving. "That's not the Ellen Hirschorn I know," he said. "You must be having an off day."

"Not true. Working a room has never been one of my talents. I forget who I'm supposed to be and I turn into little Ellen Hirschorn from Brooklyn. Still star-struck and still on the outside, looking in."

Blake's perfect face softened into a genuine and very tender smile. He brushed her cheek with his hand. "Well, then, little Ellen Hirschorn, let me take you by the hand and show you how it's done. Working a room is something I do very well. Here—here's someone you should talk to." He led her past

several clusters of people, over to a producer he had once worked for. "Mel," he said smoothly, extending his hand, "how are you? Ellen Hirschorn, meet Mel Tollgreen. I'm sure you've heard of Ellen," he said to the man. "She's the best. Mel's doing the new Harvey Banner play."

Ellen nodded. She had read the item about the play in *Variety*. Tollgreen nodded, too, acknowledging that he might have heard of Ellen Hirschorn. "So what have you been up to?" he asked. "Have I seen you in anything lately?"

Now she was okay. This was the part she had done lots of times before. She went into a tight summary of her best credits, casually finishing with, "and I do a lot of teaching," dropping the names of her most distinguished pupils, which included two pop singers and several film actors who had come to her for stage training.

He listened, sizing her up, and then he said, just as casually, "Why don't you call my office tomorrow? Randy Levinson's directing, and I never get in his way—but make an appointment. Tell him I told you to call." He produced his card, handed it to Ellen, and moved on.

"There," Blake said, squeezing her encouragingly, "that wasn't hard, was it? Now, who else do you want to meet? How about . . ."

"No," she said firmly, "this is enough for one night. I'm not greedy. You go on, do your stuff; I'll just get a drink and see what I can do on my own." She watched him making his way through the crowd. She saw several women turn to follow him with their eyes. One, an actress who had a running part on a daytime soap, went up to him, tapped him on the shoulder, flashed a perfect smile and began talking brightly. Ellen watched the scene dispassionately, without jealousy. Yes, she thought, a lot of women would probably jump at the chance to be Blake's roommate.

Within a few minutes, Blake had disengaged himself from the actress and moved toward more useful connections. She contented herself with random bits of cocktail chitchat, with strangers and vaguely known acquaintances, until Blake returned to her side, ready to leave. "All done?" she asked.

"Done," he said. "I hope you weren't bored?"

"Nah, I got one solid lead—that makes the whole thing worthwhile. I know that play Tollgreen's producing. I saw it in a workshop a few months back. I think there's something

in it that would be right for me. Now if I can convince whoever needs convincing . . .”

“You will. I got a couple of good leads, too. See, don’t you think we’d make a good team?”

She smiled and patted his arm.

“Can I spend the night?” he asked, not pressing the larger question.

“Sure,” she replied, glad for the opportunity to enjoy what Blake did best.

When they returned to the apartment, she checked her service. There were four messages, two from her father. That was unusual. She didn’t see her parents very often, except for holidays. They weren’t estranged; it was just that there didn’t seem to be much to say when they did visit. She thought of her trips to Brooklyn as duty calls, as part of what she owed. Two calls in one night set off an alarm button in her mind.

She dialed the familiar number, and although the hour was late for the Hirschorn household, the receiver was picked up at once, as if someone were standing next to the phone.

“Who’s calling please?” the voice was unfamiliar.

“This is Ellen Hirschorn. Is my father there?”

“Ellen, Ellen, you poor baby. This is Mrs. Garfield, from next door. Your papa, poor man, he’s with my Morris, in the kitchen . . .”

“What’s wrong, Mrs. Garfield? What’s happening?”

“It’s your mama, Ellen dear. I’m so sorry,” the woman’s voice broke. “She passed away. She didn’t suffer darling. The doctor said it was her heart. She was very peaceful. She took a little nap and she didn’t wake up. Can you come now, Ellen dear? Your papa needs you.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I’m coming.”

She hung up, dazed and disbelieving, and a rush of memories flooded her mind. Still pictures of the three of them, Mama and Papa and her. A family. Day trips to Coney Island. Mama’s Friday night seders. She closed her eyes and for a moment she thought she could almost smell the richness of Mama’s kitchen. The kind of richness that only the poor could afford, of dishes concocted without regard for nutrition or calories. Simple dishes that smelled heavenly and tasted so good.

She opened her eyes and met Blake’s worried face. “My mother died,” she whispered. “Tonight.”

“Oh, babe, I’m so sorry,” he said gently, gathering her

close and stroking her hair as she cried silently against his chest. "Is there anything I can do?"

She shook her head. "I have to go to Brooklyn. Right now."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No," she said, appreciating for the second time that evening how nice Blake could be. He would be out of place in her parents' home. He wasn't family or anything close. She changed quickly into her green fatigues, kissed Blake good night and went outside to look for a cab.

The first driver she stopped shook his head when she mentioned Brooklyn. "Please," she said. "It's an emergency. A death in the family."

He looked at her for a long moment, then said briskly, "Okay."

During the long ride, she stared out the window, not seeing the passing panorama of lower Manhattan, remembering the woman who had sewn costumes for school plays, nodding and smiling as Ellen had rehearsed her lines, telling her she was beautiful when she knew she was not, telling her she was smart when she felt like a dummy.

She searched herself for signs of grief, but what she seemed to be feeling was guilt. And remorse. She should have done more for her mother. She had harbored all these fantasies of what she would do when she made it. She would buy her parents things, she had told herself, send them on wonderful vacations. But in the meantime, she had done very little. Very little of what she had dreamed of, and very little of what would have mattered to her mother.

As the cab pulled over to the curb in front of the old three-family brick house, she could see that all the lights were on in their apartment. She climbed the worn steps, bracing herself for what would be upstairs.

The door was open, and when she walked inside, her father left the cluster of neighbors and came to her, arms outstretched.

"Ellen," he choked out, and then he began to cry. She felt clumsy and awkward as she embraced him. He was a small man, scarcely three inches taller than she was, and as she felt the sobs wracking his body, he seemed fragile and childlike. She felt completely inadequate as she patted his shoulders because she knew the enormity of his loss and could say nothing that would make it easier.

Her parents had been like Siamese twins, and it had been rare to see one without the other. During the early years of

their marriage, they had fought like mortal enemies, settling later into more silent forms of combat. And yet they belonged together. She knew that her father had lost the one person who anchored him to this world. And she felt guilty because his loss was not the same for her. Her parents were an irrevocable part of her, but it was a part that belonged to the past.

All she could think of, as she looked around the shabby apartment, was that she didn't belong here anymore, that she hadn't belonged here for a very long time, that Ellen Hirschorn was mortal, too, and that she very badly needed to find a place where she did belong.

## Chapter 17

"I HAVE a lot of respect for you, Kate," Ross was saying as they lunched at "their" table at the Algonquin. "Your writing gets better and better. You learn quickly. I think we're going to get some nice reader response on that last piece of yours."

Kate felt herself blushing at the compliment. At the moment she felt attractive and not at all average. Her hair had washed up nicely that morning, her skin was clear, and her eyes felt shiny. Here was Ross complimenting her on her mind, on her growth as a woman who "did" something, and curiously she was feeling more physically desirable than she had in a long time. She felt like she had stumbled onto something important. And whatever it was, it made her feel like someone special, someone who didn't have to be quite so grateful because an important, successful, attractive man like Ross was taking an interest in her.

"You really are a special person," he went on, "making a new career for yourself. It takes a strong person to do what you're doing."

"Thanks, Ross. But don't give me too much credit. Lots of women do exactly what I'm doing, and without the kind of luck and help I've had. I just do the best I can, and sometimes . . ."

"Sometimes that's very good indeed, I would say. Now let's get on with business. I'm going to take a chance with you, Kate. We've discussed the possibility of starting a new department. A forum for the readers. Not Dear Abby, not Dr. Joyce Brothers—but something akin. Maybe Kindly Kate."

"Kindly Kate?" She laughed. "That sounds like an arch-support shoe. Or English tea."

"I'm joking, but I want you to take the idea seriously. We've talked about a write-in column that would take on the flavor of an over-the-back-fence dialogue between friends. What we have in mind is not just expertise, but advice with the human touch. Not wisecracking, not Abby's salty humor, but something a little softer, a little gentler."

"You've caught me a little by surprise, Ross. I thought you wanted to talk about more articles. I don't know anything about giving advice. I wouldn't even know where to find answers for questions people might ask."

"I think you do. I think you'd surprise yourself with what you can do. You're a good listener. You care, and you're a quick learner. We have resource facilities, places you can find answers to technical questions. I'll give you a research assistant. With the personal questions, I'd just want you to use your head, your common sense and your heart." He finished on a soft note, patting her hand in a gesture that could have been brotherly or something a little more intimate. "Just in case you haven't thought of it, the money will be quite good. I don't know your financial situation, but I can tell you that the column would probably pay your rent and grocery bills. It will give you much more security than random free-lance work."

Kate considered this, and suddenly the prospect of a good steady income seemed quite dazzling. "That would be such a relief, Ross. Such a great help." The thought of not needing Harry's checks—it meant being free of the fear that bound her to him. He would still be there for the children, but she wouldn't have to be afraid of him anymore. It would feel wonderful. "If you don't mind giving me some direction," she said, "I'd love to try."

Ross smiled, his gray eyes crinkling, generating warmth and confidence. What a nice man he is, she thought. What a lovely man. Too bad he's married.

"It would be my pleasure to help you," he said. "Really. I want to see you do well. I'll even look forward to the time you outgrow *Woman's Week*."

Her face clouded over.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Your saying that, it's just made me think. I'll have to cut back on my hours at the *Courier*. I just don't think I could manage all of it. If this works out with you, I might have to give it up eventually. Ross, I feel like such an ingrate. What could I tell Rick?"

"Listen to me, Kate. You're not an ingrate. You're a woman on her own. You need to earn the best money you can, for yourself and your family. You need new opportunities. I'm sure you've given Rick your best. And that's all you owe him. I'm sure he never expected a mortgage on your future. Tell him that you'll have to cut back. Give him the choice of what he wants to do. Tell him you won't ever leave cold without giving ample notice. You can offer to help train your replacement when that time comes. That will be more than enough. It's all I would expect of you, on a professional level."

"It makes sense," she said slowly, "but it's going to be hard to leave Rick."

"That's because he means more to you than a job. And that won't change. You and Rick will always be friends. Just as I hope you and I will be, no matter where your career takes you."

The personal comment made her flush. She had the sense that Ross had just stepped over a line and was inviting her to do the same. She hesitated. Ross was awfully attractive. He had been kind and attentive and supportive. And there wasn't anyone else in her life who could hold a candle to him. She thought for a second of Wendy and pushed the thought away. This was different. She didn't start out looking for Ross's attention. She was no homewrecker. What was wrong with accepting a little kindness when it was offered?

"Kate, where are you? I seem to have lost you."

"No, no, you haven't. I was just wandering a little."

"Before you wander too far, let me ask you about dinner tomorrow night."

"Dinner?" she echoed.

"Yes, dinner. It comes after lunch and before you retire. My wife has some kind of hospital benefit meeting. I have a late day at the office and I hate to eat alone. I thought you might keep me company."

She hesitated. This seemed a little more personal than anything she'd shared with Ross before. She wanted to say yes, just for the opportunity to put on some nice clothes and spend the evening with a charming man. But common sense told her to decline politely.

As if he sensed what she was thinking, he said gently: "It's just dinner, Kate. The invitation is just for dinner, this time. Not that I wouldn't like to invite you for more; I would. But I don't want to pressure you. Or to confuse you. The invitation

has nothing to do with our work relationship. Understood?"

She nodded. She found his frankness disarming and reassuring—and a little unsettling. He had put into words what was in the air. He had made it clear that she would have choices. "Thank you for saying that. And I'd love to have dinner tomorrow night."

"Good. Now go home this afternoon and start working toward the column."

"How?"

"Put together some sample letters. Take some problems from people you know. Ask them to talk to you or make them up from what you know. Then sit down and answer them. Let me see what you do, just as a sample of style and how you think. We'll go over them together. Does that sound manageable?"

"That's fine, Ross. I'll do that, and I hope you won't expect too much this first. . ."

"Hush, Kate. Let me teach you something else about this business you're in now. Don't apologize in advance for anything. It's time enough when someone finds fault. And even then, just listen and do better."

"Thanks, Ross. I do want to learn. And you're a good teacher."

"I think so, Kate. I think I can teach you a great many things."

She ignored this last comment and finished her lunch.

The following morning Kate resolved to talk with Rick at once. She did not want to hide her intentions from the man who had given her a start. As soon as the early morning rituals had been completed, she went straight to his desk.

"Rick," she said gently.

"Yes, darlin', what's on your mind?"

She swallowed hard. "Rick, you know how much I appreciate everything you've done for me. I wouldn't want to do anything that would disappoint you."

"I know you wouldn't, darlin'. What's the matter? Why are you looking so nervous?"

The tears started to come, unexpected and unwanted. Rick got up from his desk and put his arms around her, patting her back clumsily. "Don't do that, darlin', come on now, tell Rick what this is all about."

She looked up into the red-flushed face, the watery loving eyes. "It's Ross—at *Woman's Week*. He's offered me a steady column and a lot of money, and—and . . ."

"But that's grand, Kate. It's just what you need. Why on earth are you crying?"

"It's you. It's this." She gestured, taking in the office that had become a second home to her. "I won't be able to come here as much. There just isn't going to be enough time, if the column works out. And I feel bad about that. About you."

"Kate, Kate," he said soothingly. "I never expected you to stay here forever. Why should you? It can't be enough for you. I always expected you to move on one day. I've looked forward to it. Yes, I have. Come in half-time for now. And keep doing the free-lance pieces. That's good experience for you. I'll call you when it gets really busy and I need a good right arm. Does that make you feel better?"

She smiled at him. "Sort of. I want you to know that I'll never just leave. I'll stay until you get someone else. And I'll help you train the new person, and . . ."

"Hold on, hold on. That's all fine, and I'll take you up on it. We'll worry about replacements when the time comes. Now I want you to tell me all about this new work."

"Well, I'm going to be giving advice, sort of like Dear Abby. I don't exactly know how I'm going to do it. I don't know how I'll do with problems from strangers. To tell you the truth, I'm nervous about the whole thing."

"Don't be nervous. Remember when you started here?"

"Do I ever! I didn't have all that experience, Rick. Paul and I fudged it. I'm sorry we did that, but I needed the work."

"There's no need to feel guilty, Kate. I wasn't really fooled. I could see that you were just feeling your way. And that's what you'll do now. In no time at all, you'll be a pro, you'll see."

Kate tried to keep Rick's encouraging words in mind as she slid her first blank sheet into the typewriter. She thought about the women in her group. Plenty of problems there, plenty of raw material, but what could she do with it?

She closed her eyes and remembered the first time she had walked into that cheery church room. The woman she had been then. Not very young. Not very old. Scared. Filled with questions about herself and the future.

She began to write a letter to herself—from that Kate. That one would be easy. Now. Because she had lived those problems and survived them. That was one guideline she could use—the hypothesis that most problems were either soluble or at least survivable.

## Chapter 18

"I DON'T know what you people think you're doing, but I want you to know that I'm fed up with it. I only came to this stupid group because Dr. Hatfield said it might help. So far I haven't had any help at all, just a truckload of hostility and put-downs." Wendy paused for air, scanning the group with her eyes. "I want to know right now where any of you come off with this holier-than-thou attitude. I want you to tell me why you all seem to think you're better than I am. *If* you have the guts to say it straight out, instead of just sniping at me." She sat there, defiant, chin up, daring them all to meet her eyes.

The other women shifted uncomfortably through what seemed like a very long silence. Finally Kate spoke, for she felt that she particularly had deserved Wendy's accusations. She had not liked the woman from the start. She had been appalled by her attempt to get a married man, her history of involvement with such men. She had, for the most part, kept silent whenever Wendy seemed to be looking for empathy and support, but she felt that her attitude must have been obvious. "I don't think anyone has meant to be vicious," she said. "It's just that any woman who's had an experience like mine is going to have a hard time seeing a—a triangle from your point of view. It's hard for me to see how you can just jump into the middle of another woman's life, and then act like she's some sort of obstacle you have to get rid of. This is such a big city; there *must* be some single men out there. You're a very attractive woman, and . . ."

"Oh, sure," Wendy interrupted, a hard edge of bitterness in her voice. "Tell me about it. Do you know how many *attractive* women there are in this city? You're not so bad

yourself, Kate. How many great men are beating a path to your door? Look, I just want you to know that I've never made the first move with any of these men. A couple of times I tried to keep it light—a little dinner, some laughs, you know, human companionship. But the physical thing always comes up, and I say 'why not?' Sometimes I'm so lonely that I'd kill for a little warmth and affection, and married men are the ones who are ready to give it. I don't know why that is; I've never been married. But if that makes me a terrible person, then that's what I am."

"You're not a terrible person," Ellen said, with uncharacteristic gentleness. "Like I said before, I wish you could meet Noah. You could have him all to yourself. But I'm going to tell you the same thing that Kate was trying to say: if you, and every other woman who gets tempted by a married man, would say no, then we'd all have a better set of odds to work with. If a guy knew he wasn't going to find a warm shoulder to cry on outside, he'd take care of business at home first. He'd do his shopping on his own time."

Now Wendy looked close to tears. Her voice, when she spoke again, was less sure, almost pleading. "Okay, Ellen, I respect you for talking straight to me. But why is it only me who has to do the changing? Why don't you pick on the men who do the asking? Why don't you tell them when you marry them that you're not going to put up with any running around? You knew, didn't you, Kate? You knew what was happening, but you just didn't want to face it. I don't blame you, but if you'd been stronger, like you're all telling me to be, maybe you could've stopped it right at the beginning."

"I don't know..." Kate faltered, trying to be honest with herself and with the group.

"Of course you don't, dear," Janine said. "How could you know until you've had to face something? I'll tell you the truth; I don't know what I would have done if I found out my husband had been seeing another woman. I'll tell you this: I loved Robert until the day he died. But even if I didn't, I might have been afraid to say anything. I would have been afraid of being alone. Now that he's gone, I know that being alone is something to be afraid of. It's hard when you're Wendy's age, and it's hard at my age... very hard."

"I think you've touched on something important," Dr. Hatfield said. "But do any of you realize that being alone is perhaps even harder for men? I don't want to throw statistics at you,

but the numbers we have do suggest that single men, more than any other group, have more illnesses, more accidents, more problems of every kind. And they even die earlier. Doesn't that suggest that they're not having such an easy time of it? Perhaps without knowing why, they try very hard to avoid that condition. Perhaps that's why they try to hedge their bets with more than one woman at a time."

There was silence while everyone considered this proposition. Then Ellen wisecracked: "Maybe no one's ever told them how bad off they are, so they only think they're having a swell time. Maybe we should tell them they're all doomed, and then they'll straighten out."

A ripple of laughter traveled around the room. Dr. Hatfield smiled and continued. "Maybe you're right, Ellen. Being alone has its compensations, as well as its problems. But in our society, men have generally been taught to see the compensations, women the problems. I think it's part of the mythology that a society creates to induce women to make the kind of personal sacrifice and commitment necessary to ensure the survival of the family. Now times have changed, but bits of that mythology are still very much with us."

"Yes," Kate said. "I've always felt it, what you've been saying. When Harry and I were together, we never minded an extra man at a party. But an extra woman, no matter how nice she was, that wasn't so great. I never thought about it until after Harry left. Then I was the extra woman who didn't get invited to parties."

"Does that still bother you?" Dr. Hatfield asked.

"No. Well, yes and no. I don't miss the invitations. That's part of my old life, and I don't miss that. But the attitude still bothers me."

"On that note, maybe we should call it a day," Dr. Hatfield suggested.

"No, wait, please," Janine interrupted. "I just want you all to know something about me. I got a job. The minister of the church helped me. I'm a teaching aide . . . fifth grade."

"Oh, Janine," Kate said apologetically, "why did you let us run on so long? A new job, that's really important. And you—you look different, too."

She did look different, they all agreed. The gray hair had been cut and shaped softly around her face. A hint of pink blushed her cheeks, and a new rose-colored shirtwaist hinted at a figure that was still interesting.

"Good for you," Ellen said, patting Janine on the shoulders. "We're all proud of you, kid. You've gone out and done it, in your own nice, quiet way."

The other women joined in, with words of congratulation and encouragement. As the group began to break up, Dr. Hatfield approached Wendy. "Do you think we've made any headway on the problems we discussed?"

Wendy nodded her blond curls slowly. "A little. I'm feeling a little better about everybody else here. But now I think I'm feeling worse about myself."

"We'll have to go into that when we have our private session. I think those feelings are part of some important insights for you, Wendy. You seem to be more open, less defensive than when we started. I think that's good. We'll work on that a little more next time."

As the women started to file out of the room, Rose Mancini stopped, turned around and came toward Wendy. "I have to say this to you," she began. "When we started, I looked at you and said to myself, Rose, there's a beautiful girl. She has a good job, her whole life ahead of her. So why does she do these foolish things? Why doesn't she see there's no happiness in the way she's going? Now I think it's because you have no respect for yourself. That's what you have to change, Wendy, because if you don't respect yourself, no man is going to."

As she opened the door to her apartment, Wendy thought, not for the first time, that it was an apt representation of the way her life in New York had developed. It was overpriced, yet not a particularly welcoming place, despite its good location and minimal comforts. But she had once believed this was the place to be when she had come to the city fresh from Scranton, Pennsylvania, armed with a bachelor's degree in English and a desire for an exciting new life.

Strange how things had worked out. Back in Scranton, there hadn't been much promise of excitement, not as she saw it. There had been plenty of opportunities for marriage, for a home and children. In New York, she found that she had traded those chances for a job that barely kept up with her expenses, no matter how many raises she got.

As for excitement, well, the city's brand of frenetic activity had sustained her for the first six months. She was here. She was making it. She was shopping, when she could afford it, in some of the world's most exciting stores. She was dining,

when someone who could afford it asked her, in exotic restaurants. There had been theater, cabarets, rock concerts—just as she had imagined they would be back in Scranton.

All of it had spoiled her forever for life in Pennsylvania. There was no going back now. Yet here, she felt stuck in a kind of limbo, with a sense of so many important things missing. She concluded that life in New York, the kind of life she dreamed of, really needed a special man to make it good, to give warmth, companionship and support—all the extras, emotional and financial.

Within the past few years, her life here had turned into an increasingly frantic personal odyssey, a quest for Mr. Right. She had adjusted her fantasies a dozen times, to accommodate bald heads, a spreading paunch, bad table manners, bad taste in clothes or conversation. Yet no matter what she did, no matter how many times she dressed up for a special evening, all full of hope and anticipation, she, who'd had so many eager young men in Scranton, always seemed to find disappointment.

All she had to show for her hopes were a collection of presents of no great value, and a heart full of bitter memories of how she'd been used and abandoned. The last time had been the hardest. Two years. With Gary, who had been married for ten years to a nagging, sexually unresponsive wife, he'd said. Who'd told her dozens of times that it was only a matter of time before he broke with his old life and started a new one with her.

Then the nagging wife had found out about her, had made a hateful phone call, calling her filthy, unspeakable names that had made her cry and had ordered Gary never to see her again. In spite of his frequent declarations of love, he had done exactly that. He had sent back her key with a terse note: "Sorry things didn't work out." That was it. Not even a personal telephone call. And when she tried to reach him at his office, his secretary, who had always put her through before, suddenly turned cold, officious, informing her each time that Mr. Lamston wasn't available.

For two days she had stayed home from work, sick with disbelief and disillusionment. That had been bad. Really bad. Worse than the time she'd gone away with Ron Phillips, who had actually been divorced, only to find that his idea of a fun weekend was a sexual party, involving two of his friends.

After Gary, she had started to see Dr. Hatfield. With the

help of a little Valium, she had soothed the jagged hurt into a kind of detached numbness. But she had emerged from this affair with her natural buoyancy shaken, along with her optimism that tomorrow would bring something better.

She had heard and believed so many versions of "my wife doesn't understand me," variations she had not recognized until it was too late. Tales of wives who would surely "go off the deep end" if they were left, of children who would suffer lasting psychic damage if the word *divorce* were even to be mentioned in their presences, of crippling financial debts that had to be paid off before a separation could even be considered.

Yet even when she'd had suspicions that an affair might be less than what she'd hoped for, she had invariably listened to, then succumbed to the arguments that went with them. Arguments persuading her that she was needed, compliments about her warmth, her loving nature, and her beauty. She had been made to feel that she was an oasis in a desert of personal responsibilities and joyless marriages. She'd told herself that this was a high compliment, to be wanted and needed. And for a time, each of the men in her life proved it. Hadn't they treated her so much better than the single men she'd met? Men who were princes, regardless of their looks or career possibilities, men who could treat women as disposable, interchangeable objects because there were so many to choose from.

The married men, by contrast, were attentive, considerate and reasonably generous. And by the time she noticed, invariably, that she was still spending Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Eve alone, that she was still living on the periphery of someone else's life, by the time she asked the invariable "What about me?" question, she would have sacrificed another six months, another year. Still no closer to having a man of her own. When, at one of her sessions with Dr. Hatfield, she'd spoken frankly of her growing despair, her therapist had suggested she join the women's group.

Her group meetings hadn't made her feel any better. All she had found was confusion, doubt, questions that made her feel uncomfortable. On the plus side, she had met Roger, who was living alone, though still technically married. She believed that with Dr. Hatfield's help, she might be able to make this one work.

"Have you noticed," said Kate to Ellen and Margo, as they sat at a table at La Groceria, sipping espresso and exchanging

post-group impressions, "something about women who have affairs with married men? I've just realized that they all have these cute names like Wendy, Betsy, Sunny and Harry's own little Laurie. Do you think it's all predestined when our names are given out that some of us become wives, and others become . . . *others*?"

Margo laughed. "What an interesting theory. But I don't think it will hold up. Harry's Laurie is no longer an other. And I'm sure that if I took a survey of Mario's little flings, they would come in all varieties. So, no, I don't think anything is predestined at all."

"Just a thought. Aren't you afraid sometimes, Margo? I mean, that one of Mario's flings will turn into something more?"

"I used to be, when I used to dwell on it. Now I don't let myself. It's like cancer and heart attacks. The possibility is always there, but you have to live as if it isn't going to happen to you."

"I guess."

"Anyway, I have my own theory about the kind of affairs Mario has and the kind that Wendy seems to get herself into. I don't think they convert so readily into full-blown relationships. I know you had a different experience with Harry, but basically, someone once said: 'You can't make a love affair out of a roll in the hay.' A man starts with someone like Wendy as a convenience. It's very limited because he decides up front there isn't going to be any commitment. It's not open, so I think the whole thing gets stunted. Like a bonsai tree."

"I suppose."

"What is it, Kate? What's all this curiosity about triangles? Is there something going on that you haven't talked about?"

"It's Ross."

"Your boss," Ellen said.

"Yeah."

"Well, what about it? Are you having a thing with him?"

"No, not really. We've gone out to dinner a couple of times. I like him a lot. He's such good company. He seems to have a lot of the qualities I find in bits and pieces with other men. I'm never bored. He seems to understand what I'm going through. He's sophisticated and kind . . ."

"And married," Ellen finished.

Silence.

"Well?" Kate asked, a little defiantly.

"Well, what?" Ellen countered. "You haven't done any-

thing. You want some disapproval in advance?"

"It's just that I've been thinking about it; I mean really thinking about it. I have the feeling from what he's said, that it's up to me. You know . . ."

"Forget it, Kate," Ellen said decisively. "An office romance isn't for you."

"Why?" she asked heatedly. "Why do you say that? You don't even know the man. How can you know for sure it isn't for me?"

"Because you're too square. Too conventional to get anything but misery from a married man."

"But how do you know for sure? I'll tell you one thing—Ross is the most appealing prospect on my horizon right now. What if it's him or nothing?"

"Then I'd stick with nothing," Ellen replied promptly. "What you don't need is more battle scars. Or to end up like Wendy. Something else will come along. You'll see. Anyway, Ross isn't going anywhere. That's one thing about a married man. You miss this turn, you can always catch him on the next go-round, if that's what you really want."

"Ellen! That doesn't sound like you. You're so upbeat where men are concerned. Most of the time, anyway."

"I'm just realistic. And I don't waste as much time as you guys do wailing about why everything is so tough. I'm not saying your boss is a bad guy. I'm just saying that if he wants to play now, he'll be willing six months from now. And I don't think you're a bad girl for being interested. What I think is that you're not cut out for fun and games and '*adios, muchacho*' when it's over."

Kate turned to Margo. "You're shocked by me, aren't you?"

"No," Margo said slowly. "Not shocked. You've been on one side of a triangle, so I suppose it's natural that you'd be tempted by the other side. Do it if you want to, if you haven't got anything better to do. But isn't it ironic how we're talking like this after we all jumped on Wendy awhile back?"

"I know," Kate said. "Now that I've been feeling this way, it's easier to understand her. I just don't know if I can actually do it. I like Ross, but I don't know if I can manage everything that goes with a real affair. All the lurking and hiding, stuff like that."

"There's one more thing you'd better consider, too," Margo warned.

"What?"

"Ross is your employer. Think about the time he decides it's over. Could you just shake hands and go on working for him, the way you did before? I doubt it. Or suppose his wife finds out? I'll bet she'd have you out of there in a flash."

"Yeah, I haven't really let myself think about that part. I guess good jobs are at least as scarce as interesting men."

"At least," Margo said dryly, and the three of them laughed together.

## Chapter 19

"GUESS what," Kate said mysteriously, as she set the table for dinner. "Guess where I'm going tonight?"

"Where? Where?" Josh asked, always glad to play this kind of game.

"I'm going to do a story on The Young & The Useless. What do you think of that, Mr. Critic? You're the one who's always saying I never write about anything neat."

"Wow," he said, "wow. How come they gave a story like that to you?"

"What do you mean, to me?"

"Well, Mom, I mean, you like Johnny Mathis. How could you know anything about a band like The Young & The Useless?"

"For your information, that's exactly why I got the assignment. It's supposed to be amusing, a generation-gap view of your kind of music. Besides, the regular music guy is out sick, and there wasn't anyone else."

Sarah and Josh started to laugh.

"Okay for you," Kate said, with mock-injured dignity. "I take that to mean you don't want me to bring home any freebies from the press conference? Like their newest album?"

"Oh, Mom," Sarah protested. "Don't be mean. Can I have it? And an autograph, too?"

"I see you have your price. Okay, you can both split up whatever I bring home. I don't know about autographs; I was planning to just blend into the crowd. What do you think I should wear?"

The children giggled again.

"What is this?" she said. "More disrespect? Are you telling

me I can't blend into a group?" She turned around and saw her son tracing a square with his finger.

"Gotcha," she said. "Boy, are you going to pay for that. I think you've conned your last video game quarter out of me. So what should I wear?"

"Oh, Mom," Sarah said in that be-patient-with-your-parent voice she'd been using a lot on Kate lately. "Just wear some jeans and a T-shirt. It's pretty hopeless, no matter what you wear."

"I think this is going to be fun, no matter what you all say. I just won't tell anyone I like Johnny Mathis."

Sarah nudged Josh, and the two children fell into a fresh paroxysm of giggling.

The press conference, which was held in a large midtown hotel, began in a remarkably subdued, neo-establishment atmosphere. Only the refreshments—a sickly pink punch obviously meant to suggest blood, hors d'oeuvres in the shape of dismembered body parts, and a molded salad forming a pair of aggressively jutting female breasts—indicated that this was a reception for the current bad boys of hard rock.

To Kate's surprise a number of the music writers covering the event looked remarkably conservative, as they clustered around the open bar and drank heartily of whatever was being offered. The color in the room was provided by a cluster of younger people, dressed in what Kate thought of as dead men's clothes: pants that were too tight and too short, old jackets with shoulders out to there, rayon shirts in shades of chartreuse and fuchsia, with hair outlandishly cut and tinted in rainbow hues to match their shirts. Here and there, she saw a David Bowie look-alike, and over in one corner, she caught the sweet scent of marijuana, but generally, everyone was behaving in the usual press-conference fashion, waiting for the band to make their appearance and loading up on the food and drink in the meantime.

She looked around the room for someone to talk to, but no one looked very promising. She took a copy of the group's latest album and the fat press kit provided by a smiling young woman with pink hair. She sat down at a corner table to look at the pictures and to read the press agent hype about the band's upcoming European tour.

Suddenly a hand bearing a cup of the sick pink punch appeared under her nose. "Drink, ma'am?" a male voice drawled.

She looked up. The drink and the hand were attached to a thin, rangy body dressed in jeans, cowboy boots and a western shirt. The man was thirtyish, she thought, bearded, mustached and curly-haired—a visual leftover from the Bob Dylan-Joan Baez era. In this setting, he looked as anachronistic as she felt. Still, there was a sweetness in his face, and she didn't have the heart to turn him away. "Thanks," she said, accepting the drink, wondering if it contained any mind-altering substances. The man's eyes were unfocused, the lids down to half-mast. They seemed to be a pretty absinthe color, but she couldn't really tell, since they were screened behind a pair of tinted glasses, the marijuana smoker's favorite refuge against light.

"You looked lonely here, all by yourself," he said.

"I guess I did," she admitted. "This is the first time I've been to something like this."

"I'm lonely, too," he said. "My wife left me this morning."

Now she was certain he was stoned. This was not the sort of small talk you made with a total stranger, not in the middle of the afternoon and without laying some preliminary groundwork.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, hoping that this would be the end of his personal confession.

"She was right," he went on, and she thought, Lord, what is it about me that invites this sort of behavior. Then she realized she was nodding sympathetically in spite of herself.

"Well," he said, his voice blurry, whether with emotion or herb, she couldn't tell, "that's that."

She marveled at the simplicity of a personality that could requiem a marriage with a *that's that*.

"What happens now? Here, I mean," she asked, trying to shift the conversation to more impersonal ground.

"Everybody drinks and eats. Then the band shows up and says how great they're doing. Maybe they take a couple of questions. Photographers take pictures. Then everybody leaves."

"That's it?"

"That's it. Media gang-bang. Television people get a little extra."

"How do you make a story out of that?"

"Easy. You talk about the new album, talk about where they've been, where they're going. Call it a comeback, a slide-down. Make it part of a trend. Compare them to some other band. Say the new album's innovative, derivative. Say it's daring or playing it safe. That kind of stuff."

Kate was impressed at his lucidity. "Do you do this all the time?" she asked.

"Yup. I work for *Rolling Stone*."

She was even more impressed. Josh and Sarah would love this, she thought. A writer from *Rolling Stone*. But she still didn't know how she was going to concoct a story that Rick could use. Who could she compare the band to? Johnny Mathis? She'd probably heard their sound blaring out of the family stereo. But she knew she'd be hard-pressed to pick their noise out of a crowd, or to say what made it innovative or derivative. She shook her head, frowning.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Do you need some help with this stuff?"

"I think I need more than help. I think I need a different brain to write this story."

He smiled a slow-motion smile that made him look ingenious and even sweeter. "I'd be glad to give you a hand. I can do this stuff in my sleep."

You probably do, she thought, and then scolded herself for being mean and judgmental. The man was trying to be kind. "That would be nice, thank you."

"Go somewhere for a cup of coffee after this?"

She nodded yes, without debating the pros and cons of such a move.

The two of them sipped pink punch in silence for a while. Then a flurry of activity announced the arrival of The Young & The Useless. There were four of them, four anorexic bodies clad in torn jeans and leather jackets and high-top black sneakers, smiling and mellow and obviously pharmaceutically fortified for this appearance.

The record company PR man introduced them, calling the band the most innovative bad boys in rock history. He promised that the new album would go platinum within six weeks, adding that the boys' Madison Square Garden appearance had been sold out for months. Then he called for questions.

This first was from an earnest-looking woman from the *Boston Phoenix*. She asked something about a drug-related arrest that had made headlines a few weeks before. The drummer nodded happily and said something Kate couldn't hear. A man who said he was from *The New York Times* asked about the violent nature of their songs. The four of them beamed beatifically and nodded in unison, saying things like "Yeah" and "Absolutely."

The television minicams moved in closer, and the band started to mug obligingly, making faces, sticking their tongues out and striking the bad-boy poses which had become their trademark. As if on cue, a tape of their last hit, "Off Your Mama," blared out at ear-shattering volume.

When the television crews finished, the boys left, and the gathering started to break up. A few diehards made a last foray into the food, which by now had a somewhat obscene quality, like the fallout after a dissecting session in a biology lab.

"Ready to go?" the man asked.

Kate nodded.

"By the way," he said, "my name's Bobby Lee Harris."

"Kate Sherwood. Are you from the South?"

He smiled sleepily. "People always think that. My mother's from Georgia. I was born in New Jersey. Lived down south a bit. It's a little quiet and slow. But nice."

Kate smiled, too. She wondered what Bobby Lee's perception of *quiet and slow* might be. He looked like a man who lived in slow motion.

They went to a small coffee shop near the hotel. As soon as they ordered, he asked: "Do you want me to write something for you?"

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to do that. What about your own piece?"

"I told you, I can do this stuff in my sleep. Plenty for two pieces. It's all bullshit anyway. You can say anything you want and make a case for it. Is this band hot? Is it not?"

She laughed at his obvious ease with his work. "You don't sound like you enjoy this kind of writing much."

"Sure I do. It's better than honest work. Pay's bad, but the hours are good. Lots of fringe benefits. I just have a bad case of sour grapes. Always wanted to play professionally myself. Never seemed to get past the fringes. Then it was too late. Styles change, you know?"

"Yes," she said, "I know." She had met a lot of people with that kind of past, would-be actors, near-singers. "Anyway, I couldn't ask you to write my piece for me. It wouldn't sound right. I don't know anything about this music or the people who make it. So maybe I'll just do it from that angle—a parent's angle. Maybe if you tell me what all the experts say about it, I'll go home and play the album and then tell something about how the whole experience felt to me."

"Sounds good," he smiled again. He took out a pad and

pencil and started to write, ever so slowly. She watched, almost nodding off herself. The man certainly has a relaxing effect, she thought. Here I am sipping coffee and almost falling asleep.

When he had filled a page, he offered it to her and asked: "That enough?"

She squinted as she tried to read the spidery scrawl. The writing was childlike, but the material was exactly right. "Yes," she said, "that's perfect. Thank you."

"Well," she said after they had finished their coffee, "it's been very nice to meet you, Bobby Lee. And I do thank you again for your help. I really appreciate it."

He looked at her through half-closed eyes. "Want to go out sometime?"

She was startled. Reflexively she started to make an excuse, then thought, why not? Bobby Lee didn't look very dangerous. And he certainly was different. "Okay," she said.

"I'll call you, Kate. Want to give me your phone number?"

She was surprised he remembered her name. She produced the business cards she'd recently had printed and handed him one.

He walked her to the subway, waved her down the stairs with a jaunty, "See you."

He called the following morning, and once again Kate was surprised. Bobby Lee seemed like he would forget a lot. She imagined he could lose or at least misplace entire portions of his life.

"Want to go to the Young & Useless concert Friday night?" he asked, sounding a little livelier than he did the day before. "Broaden your musical education," he added persuasively.

"Sure," she agreed. "Where should I meet you?"

"I'll come and pick you up," he said, almost reproachfully. Somehow she hadn't imagined he was one for old-fashioned protocol.

"Fine, if it's not too much trouble." She gave him her address and wondered what Margo would say about this newest development in her life. Somehow she couldn't imagine Margo and Bobby Lee in the same room. She liked the idea of expanding her horizons. At this moment, she thought of Bobby Lee as an experience, rather than as a living, breathing man.

He turned up for their date in a variation of the outfit he had worn to the press conference. He had added a jacket, she

supposed, in acknowledgment of the fact that this was a date. She had stayed with the safety of jeans and a shirt. Visually they matched. Sort of.

When the children heard the door, they came running into the living room to make an inspection. Kate hadn't said anything about Bobby Lee, except to mention that he worked for *Rolling Stone*, which impressed them tremendously.

"Hi, y'all," he said in greeting to the three of them.

Kate made the introduction and saw Josh and Sarah exchange silent editorial glances. She imagined they would have a lot to discuss after she left. "Can I offer you anything before we go?" she asked.

"Do you have any coffee handy?"

"Sure." She went into the kitchen and threw a handful of beans into her coffee grinder. Over the sound of the machine, she heard a surge of animated conversation, punctuated with several bursts of laughter. Apparently Bobby Lee was not intimidated by a pair of strange kids.

She made the coffee, then brought the pot and two mugs into the living room. "Here we go," she said, handing one to Bobby Lee.

"Hey, Mom," Josh said excitedly, "did you know that Bobby Lee did a story on John Lennon once? Right in his own house?"

"No," she said, "I didn't."

"And Keith Richard, too," Sarah chimed in.

"Umm," she murmured, intrigued by the instant rapport Bobby Lee seemed to have with both her children.

"Boy, are you lucky," Josh said, "to see The Young & The Useless. Boy, I wish it was me."

Bobby Lee smiled and ruffled Josh's hair. "Wish I knew that yesterday," he said. "I could have maybe had another pair of tickets."

"Really?" Josh seemed enchanted by his near good fortune.

"Really. Tell you what. They're gonna do another gig next week in Jersey. If your mom says it's okay, I'll get you guys in. Maybe take you backstage."

"Do you mean that?" Josh jumped up and tugged at Bobby Lee's sleeve. "Do you mean it?"

"I mean it, Josh. I never say anything I don't mean."

By the time Kate and her new friend were ready to leave, she had the feeling that her children were more than ready to turn her over to Bobby Lee, lock, stock and barrel, as fair exchange for his favors.

\* \* \*

Although the concert had been sold out for weeks, hordes of fans mobbed the streets outside the Garden, some hoping to buy tickets from scalpers, others hoping only to catch a glimpse of the band as they entered the arena. As she looked into the crowd, Kate thought that she and Bobby Lee were possibly the only attendees past the age of consent.

His press seats were excellent, yet she had to fight off a small wave of claustrophobia, induced in part by the density of people and noise, in part by the sweet smell of marijuana that filled the air around her. Bobby Lee seemed to sense what she felt, and he took her hand, smiled and closed his eyes. Apparently not high, he seemed to exercise some kind of Zen control over himself. Kate wondered if his mellowness was ever shattered by such minor irritants as alarm clocks or broken refrigerators.

When the band took the stage, the audience suddenly focused all its collective energy into one explosive burst of shouting and clapping. Kate covered her ears, and when the first number started, she was tempted to keep her hands exactly where they were. At first she could barely make out the lyrics—the boys seemed to be saying something about how tough it was to be bad. As she adjusted to the high noise level, Kate found that some of the lyrics did have a certain mischievous charm. And some way into the third number, she looked at Bobby Lee and told him, in all honesty, that she was actually having fun.

## Chapter 20

"You know," Ellen said, "there's something I want to get off my chest."

Faces turned expectantly in her direction. "Well, two things actually. First, I think we all spend too much time talking about men."

"Why do you think we do that?" Myra asked.

"I don't mean just us, I mean women. It's like the old Lenny Bruce line: 'Men detach, women obsess.' Now we're all supposed to be modern women. We want to make something of ourselves, but instead of concentrating on that, we keep getting stuck in the same old groove."

"So what are you suggesting?" Dr. Hatfield asked.

"I think we should face the fact that we do it and then cut down. Like we do when we go on a diet or slow down on cigarettes. It ain't easy, but you can make yourself do it."

"Well," Myra smiled. "Do you think we should just call 'Time,' or something like that, if we feel we're spending too much time on problems with men?"

"I don't know if we can do that. I mean, we're supposed to be free to talk about whatever we need to talk about. But if everybody thinks it's a good idea, maybe we could agree to do it on our own. Monitor ourselves a little bit." She looked around. The women were nodding, making sounds of assent.

"You seem to be in agreement," Dr. Hatfield said. "What was the second thing you wanted to get off your chest?"

Ellen hesitated. "I had an affair with my dentist." A great burst of laughter interrupted her. "Okay, okay, I know what I just said. But this doesn't have to do with men—it has to do with me. As you all know, I've been what you might call sexually active since I left Noah."

"I'll say," Wendy said sharply. "You've turned into a regular bedbug."

"Well," Ellen said defensively, "it hasn't been all that easy. I thought all I had to do was leave Noah and I'd have it made. I thought all I had to do was get loose and the world was going to be one big candy store. Well, it ain't so. And I still have to take care of Noah. If I don't check his refrigerator and his laundry, he'd end up filthy and dead of starvation."

"You're wandering, dear," Janine prodded. "What about the dentist?"

"All I meant was that life is still hard. And it makes everything easier when I have a nice warm body, a nice warm man in my bed. Blake just sort of wandered off after I said 'No dice' on living together, so now I have to catch a little loving on the run . . ."

"The dentist," Janine repeated.

"Yeah, the dentist. Well, I had just finished coaching one of my students. She's replacing Mara Wilson in the new Lance Kingsley play. It's a part I would kill for, and I started to get depressed. Oh, I'm working a lot, but I just can't seem to grab on to the big one—the one that makes everybody remember who you are. Anyway, then my tooth started to throb, so I called my dentist, and he said he'd see me right away. He gave me a shot of Novocain, and while he's working away, I start to look at him. I mean really look. He looked so sweet and concerned that I started to get really turned on. Then he was finished, and he was taking the white thing off my neck. I said: 'Is that it?' He laughed and said: 'That's it, unless you want to dance.' I don't know what possessed me, but I said: 'Well, actually, I'd like to fool around.'"

Kate started to giggle.

"Wait," she continued. "There's more. We did it, right there in his office. And we've been doing it ever since. It's pure sex, there's nothing more to it. I don't care anything about teeth, and he doesn't know beans about acting. So what do you all think? Am I on some new destructive kick or something?"

"Are you asking us to approve or disapprove?" Myra asked.

"I don't know," Ellen answered. "I'm just wondering if all this promiscuity, if it's wrong for me. My mama from Brooklyn didn't bring up her little Ellen to be a bedbug."

"Ellen, dear," Janine said, "from what you've told us, there wasn't much of anything like that going on between you and

Noah. You're still a young woman. Maybe you're just making up for lost time. Maybe after you get it all out of your system, you'll settle down."

"Do you think so?" Ellen turned to Myra.

The therapist smiled. "That's for you to answer, Ellen. You know that."

"Yeah, I guess so. Okay, I've taken up enough time. Let somebody else talk."

"I'm afraid what I'm going to say is going to sound rather dull after that," Margo began, "but I don't quite understand what's happening. You all know I've been writing that shopping column on Kate's paper. Now it seems like one of the most important things I do. My life seems so much more interesting."

"So what's your problem?" Wendy asked sourly. "It seems to me like you had everything in the world before. So now you have everything—plus a new toy. Big deal."

Margo ignored the younger woman's tone. "It's Mario. At first he was amused by the whole thing. He acted like it was a new toy, as you put it. But lately he seems quite annoyed. He's hinting that I've been neglecting him."

"Are you?" Janine asked.

"I don't think so. His meals are always there, whenever he wants them. I still try to be at home whenever he's there. Occasionally I do some of the paperwork for the column in the evening. I can't think of any other changes in our routine."

"How do you react when Mario says these things?" Myra asked.

"I feel that he isn't being fair. I don't see why he should be so annoyed."

Wendy snorted. "Poor Margo. Your husband gives you the world on a plate. But you don't think he's allowed to ask for your undivided attention."

There was a moment of silence. Margo seemed reluctant to go on.

"I don't think we should resort to sarcasm," Myra intervened. "There are other ways to express disagreement. What about you, Janine? How are you doing?"

"Well," the older woman smiled shyly, "I'm managing. I'm having some problems with the job. The teacher I've been assigned to—she's just a young little thing, and she doesn't seem terribly intelligent to me. Yet when she speaks to me, it's in the same way she speaks to the children. They seem to

like me more than they like her, and I think that makes her angry."

"Have you talked to her?" Kate asked.

"I didn't want to appear pushy, so I did wait a bit. But two days ago, I asked her if I could have a little more responsibility. She smiled, but I could tell she was annoyed. She said: 'Now, Janine, we wouldn't want you to take on too much at once, would we? When I feel you're ready, I'll be only too glad to give you some more demanding work.' At first I felt so hurt, but later in the afternoon I was angry. I wanted to tell her that I was every bit as capable as she was. I wanted to say that my years of living were as important as her degrees..."

"So what did you say?" Ellen asked.

"Nothing," Janine frowned, recalling the incident. "I was afraid I would lose my job. All I could think of was that if I were a black woman or a Hispanic, I could go to the principal and say she was discriminating against me."

"But she is discriminating," Kate argued. "And you are part of an important minority group."

"What?" Janine looked bewildered, and then she stiffened with annoyance. "Oh, no, I don't want that, Kate. I don't want to be a senior citizen. That makes me feel terrible. I don't want to feel as if I have to behave in old ways. I don't feel so old, and"—she softened—"I'm going to tell you something that will surprise you all." She paused. "I met a nice man last week at the Saturday night potluck supper, right here in the church hall. He invited me out, and," she smiled mischievously, "we had a double date—with his mother and her beau. She was so funny and so full of life. Why, she made me see a great many things differently."

"I wonder if you realize how different you sound," Myra said. "How involved. Even when things aren't going your way, you're out there trying."

"Yes. I mean, no, I hadn't realized it until you mentioned it. Does that mean I'm getting better?"

"It means you're living again. And that's better than not living, isn't it?"

## Chapter 21

It had started out as a routine dinner party, like the dozens of perfect parties Margo had arranged before. The guests of honor were several Italian businessmen, old friends—acquaintances, really—of Mario's. They were in New York to launch a new venture, and Mario had instructed her to prepare a special evening for them.

She looked particularly lovely tonight and she knew it. Classically beautiful, she wore a white silk dress that fell in a fluid, unbroken column from her shoulders to the floor. Her hair was upswept into a cluster of shiny golden curls, her ears adorned with two perfect aquamarines that complemented the sparkle of her eyes.

As she mingled with the guests, making certain that glasses were filled and ashtrays emptied, she heard the word *magazine* mentioned. Without seeming to make an effort, she joined the man who was speaking. It was Fabrizio Pasolini, a man she had entertained before, a man of diverse interests, most of them based in Italy. She listened quietly as he spoke, explaining to several Americans that he was involved in launching a new magazine in New York and was just beginning to assemble a staff.

"Can I freshen your drink, Fabrizio?" she asked, flashing her most winning smile.

"Why, yes, Margo, thank you."

"And you must have something to eat as well," she flirted, linking her arm in his and skillfully moving him away from the rest of the group. She ordered a Campari and soda from the bartender they employed for larger parties, then led Fabrizio into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator, then wrapped a

slice of paper-thin prosciutto around a breadstick. "Here," she said, "a little touch of home for you."

"It's very good, *tante grazie*, Margo," he said. She thought he looked a little quizzical at all this personal attention.

"Now," she said, after the bartender had brought Fabrizio's drink, "tell me all about this new venture of yours. It sounds fascinating."

"Well," he said, "what we have is a magazine patterned after *Bellissima*, which is one of our Italian publications. It is also the leading woman's magazine in Italy."

"How marvelous," she said breathlessly, all wide-eyed interest.

"We think we can do well here. We've done some preliminary test studies, and our idea seems to be a viable one. But surely this isn't so interesting for you, Margo..."

"Oh, but it is. You see, I've been working in publishing myself," she said, thinking as she spoke what a grandiose description she'd given of what she actually did. But Fabrizio couldn't know that, not with this elegant apartment and Mario behind her. "So of course I'm interested in hearing about something new. Perhaps I can be of some assistance."

A flicker of understanding crossed his face. "Well, then, perhaps you can. What we had in mind is something very different from publications like *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. We believe these are not very relevant to the woman who lives outside the big cities, whose daily life is too prosaic and too financially limited to require a new sable or a three-hundred-dollar basic dress. Our success in Italy has been with the mass market. We believe we can do the same here. We are seeking our market in the woman who works because she has to, not because she is seeking emotional fulfillment, the woman who has to make her dollars count and who doesn't want to read about things she can't afford. Our magazine will not sell fantasies."

"But you must be aware that we already have a number of magazines, supermarket magazines, which attempt to reach the kind of woman you're describing."

"Yes, of course. We have used these magazines in our testing, and we have analyzed their weaknesses. Basically they lack excitement and color. They make it seem rather dismal not to be well off. We hope to do a little better. I think we can eliminate these competitors, as soon as readers become aware of our existence."

She smiled at his confidence, and for some reason, she thought of the Italian campaign into Ethiopia. "You seem to have anticipated everything," she said. "So I'm sure you've anticipated the need for a clear understanding of the American woman's mentality. You will have to translate your formula into American terms. I'm sure you're aware that American women are different in many respects from their Italian counterparts."

"Exactly so," he said, and she saw that she had scored a point for intelligence. "This is one of the issues which has come up during our preliminary meetings. This is why the selection of staff is critical. We are going to need people who can understand our concept very clearly and then help us make that translation you spoke of."

"Possibly this is where I might help. I'm quite familiar with the New York publishing scene," she lied.

"Well, then, why don't we have lunch this week," he suggested, producing his business card and scribbling a local number on it. "I'm flying back to Milan next Tuesday. If you call my secretary in the morning, she can check my agenda and make a date. I don't mean to be so formal with you, Margo, but I really don't know what else has been scheduled..."

"I understand perfectly," she said. "I'd be lost without my appointment book directly in front of me." Satisfied that she had made an impact on Fabrizio, she said: "Goodness, here we've been talking business, and this is supposed to be a social evening. Here, let me get you some more prosciutto or perhaps a smoked oyster..."

Margo did not mention the magazine again, though in fact all kinds of schemes were taking shape in her head. She made certain that Fabrizio was seated next to her at dinner, and she affected a new pose, her mannequin pose, languid, cool, the kind of calculated indifference that only a truly beautiful or supremely confident woman could carry off. It was a stance that incited men to make efforts to amuse and to win her. She flirted with Fabrizio in a carefully controlled way. She wanted him to consider what a pleasure it might be to work with her without giving him the idea that she was encouraging anything more. It was a difficult balance to strike, but Margo had always been confident with men. With everyone except the man she had married.

She was satisfied that she had succeeded with Fabrizio when he made his good-nights and said: "I can't tell you what a

delightful evening I've had, Margo. I have always thought you to be an exceptionally lovely woman, but tonight I have seen a new facet of your personality. Mario," he said, turning to his host, "if I haven't told you before that you are a very lucky man, then I have been remiss."

Mario shook his friend's hand without comment, but Margo caught the lift in his eyebrows, the silent beginning of the question he would ask later.

And ask he did, after the guests had left, after the caterer's staff had finished their preliminary cleanup and just as she was starting toward her bedroom.

"A moment please, Margo," he said. "What was all that with Fabrizio?"

"It's late, Mario, can't we discuss it tomorrow?"

"Indulge me, please, my dear."

"Oh, well, then, it's not such a big thing. Fabrizio is starting that new magazine, you must know about it, and we're going to have lunch to talk about it. That's all."

"Surely you're not thinking of getting involved?"

"Why not?" she asked innocently.

"Why not? Haven't you learned anything from me in all these years? What makes you think you're qualified to work for Fabrizio? Suppose, just suppose that for the sake of our friendship, he does find something for you. And suppose it doesn't work out well. Let us even suppose that your association is a total disaster. Can't you see what a position that will put me in?"

She could see that he meant to close this subject, to win this argument here and now. At one time, not so long ago, she would have deferred. She would not have pressed on any matter where he had expressed a strong objection. But something in his argument, in his assumption that she would be a total disaster stiffened her backbone. "And what makes you think," she challenged, "that I have any intention of taking on anything for which I'm not qualified." Though, in fact, this was exactly what she had in mind. "You seem to forget that I did have a life before we married. I was involved in the area of fashion and beauty, which will be two vital elements in Fabrizio's project. I want you to know," she lied again, "that I had every intention of making it clear to Fabrizio that I was an independent agent in this matter—that he was not to consider the fact that I was your wife. All I ask of you, Mario, is that you not use your friendship to prevent him from giving me fair consider-

ation. I'm sorry to have to say this, but I had thought you were secure and confident enough not to resent any little enterprise I might launch on my own."

He looked at her suspiciously, as if she had suddenly taken on a strange and dangerous coloration. "My dear Margo," he said, with a patience that was clearly forced, "what I have just said to you has nothing to do with my ego. If you are asking me to take a neutral position with Fabrizio, then I will do so. But since this conversation seems to have taken a personal turn, let me tell you that my concern these days is with your security. You seem to have developed a reckless disregard for your priorities. I have, as you must agree, never interfered with any of your leisure-time pursuits. All I have ever asked is that you in turn do not allow these to interfere with the obligations you have to our marriage, our son, and our home. I must point out that none of these obligations are overly strenuous, thanks to the reasonably competent help we employ. They merely require that you maintain a presence here, that you pay some attention to what is going on. Now I see that your new friends have shown you a new toy: this independence game. I must also remind you that most of the women who are so vocal about this independence would sell their souls to have the kind of comfort and security you enjoy. It would be a pity if you allowed this...this idea of outside work to jeopardize what you have. I trust you understand."

"Perfectly," she said stiffly as she went into her bedroom. She understood that Mario was giving her a serious warning. Not quite an ultimatum, but a warning she could not afford to disregard. At one time, his words and the tone of his voice would have frightened her into total submission. But now she felt like a gambler who has tasted the heady intoxication of winning. She wanted more. And like a gambler, she told herself she would be prudent. She would not risk everything. She would only take small chances. She would know when to stop.

There had always been risk, the smell of danger, in this marriage. On the surface, it was all very civilized, very genteel and mannered, but underneath there was something very primitive and exciting.

Margo had never thought of herself as an intellectual or brainy woman. She knew she was not stupid—Mario never would have chosen a stupid woman, no matter how beautiful. Physical beauty could engage him, hold him for a moment or two. She had something else: raw animal instincts. She could

smell danger. Sometimes she retreated and sometimes she was drawn. And that was what she needed to play the game that was her marriage.

Mario liked to win, she knew that. But her secret, the idea she played with from time to time, when he was pushing hard, when he had her in retreat, was that one day, when it came down to a real contest of wills, she might risk beating him. Just once.

## Chapter 22

GETTING to know Bobby Lee was easy. Easier than it had ever been to know a man. He was kind and gentle and totally undemanding. Slow was fine with him. Kate had the sense that the two of them were a total mismatch, as disparate as two people could be in style, appearance and personal tastes. And yet...they had a rapport that made the differences not abrasive, not threatening.

At first she had felt a little uneasy with someone who smiled so much. She felt this suggested a certain regular departure from reality. But the smiles seemed to make it all so easy. No need to be on your toes. She felt that once Bobby Lee decided to like you, he would be hard to dissuade or discourage.

Her children took to him with remarkable speed. They had teased a bit at first about her new boyfriend, but there was no real objection to it. It was as if they felt they were expected to say something about Bobby Lee's presence in Kate's life, and they did it in the only way they knew how. The reality was that they had liked the man at once. He was one of them.

And he was very good with them. He offered, unselfconsciously, to take them to rock concerts. With incredible patience and a lack of concern for his expensive equipment, he taught Josh how to use a camera and how to take his own picture.

With the same gentle patience, he insinuated his way into her life, rubbing her neck when she was tired, making her soothing cups of herb tea while she soaked in the bathtub. And once he was there, she found that she liked his presence.

As she got to know him, she realized that his outward appearance, his state of near somnambulism was deceptive. He did turn in assignments on time, and those sleepy, dreamy eyes were remarkably alert when he worked a camera. She saw a

story he had done on a major rock star. He brought to the piece a freshness and curiosity that made the man seem interesting and human. There was an absence of both the star-worship and the judgmentalism that generally went into celebrity articles. He had a raw, unpolished intelligence that he rarely displayed, except in his writing. As a strong believer in the work ethic, Kate was impressed, captivated by this incongruity between the personality he presented to the world and the interior workings of his mind.

He seemed to be a creature of very basic instincts. He found her at the same time he had lost his *lady*. He never discussed his failed marriage in detail, any more than he discussed his growing attachment to her. Once he said: "Gee, Kate, you saved my life," referring, she supposed, to the convenient timing of their meeting. She never got a clear idea of what his marital problems had been. He took a stance she thought might have been gallant. He said very little that would give a clue as to his wife's character, her personality or her identity. "A strong woman," he said once, and she couldn't figure out whether this was a compliment or a complaint.

The thing she liked best about Bobby Lee was that he made the here-and-now nicer than it might have been without him. For the first time since her breakup with Harry, her life seemed reasonably well-rounded: interesting work, a good relationship with her children and someone pleasant to share it with. There could be no future in it, she told herself. And she didn't see any need to concern herself with tomorrow.

There was no danger, no fear with Bobby Lee. Maybe it was because she wanted nothing from him, nothing beyond what he gave. She had no agenda for him, no plans, no vine-covered anything penciled in. Bobby Lee was temporary, and she was sure he understood that.

"Could we go, Mom? It sounds like fun. Could we?" Josh's voice rose, his body tense with anticipated pleasure.

"Well . . ." Kate hesitated. Bobby Lee's invitation to spend a weekend at his cabin in Woodstock was tempting. She and the children hadn't been anywhere out of the city in ages. But she wondered how it would go, all four of them confined together in a family situation, where escape wouldn't be that simple. The children seemed eager, and Bobby Lee was certainly easy to be with.

"Okay," she said to the three eager faces.

"Yay," Josh and Sarah reacted together.

"That's nice," Bobby Lee agreed.

So it was settled that the four of them would pile into Bobby Lee's station wagon and head north, early Saturday morning.

The drive to Woodstock was reasonably pleasant, in spite of the frequent rest stops for candy bars, drinks and bathroom facilities. When Josh announced that he was getting carsick, Bobby Lee pulled into the nearest gas station without a complaint, and Kate couldn't help thinking how impatient Harry would have been. He went into the station and came back with a can of Coke and a bunch of paper towels soaked in cold water.

"Here you go, Josh," he said, "this will make you feel better." He wiped the boy's face gently and gave him the soda. "Sip a little of this. It will settle your stomach. We'll stay here until you feel okay."

When Josh said he felt well enough to go on, Bobby Lee patted the child's head. "Just let me know if you feel bad, and we'll stop again."

They arrived at the cabin early in the afternoon. The place was surprisingly tidy and well-looked-after. Kate realized that she had expected something a bit more seedy and run-down.

"It's nice," she said, admiring the stone fireplace, the rough pine walls, the beamed ceiling and the simple rustic furniture.

"Yeah," he agreed shyly. "I like it here. Wanna go get some stuff to eat?"

"I think we'd better. This crowd is going to get restless soon, even after the junk we had on the way."

Sarah and Josh were left behind to explore the cabin, while Kate and Bobby Lee drove to a nearby market.

"What should we make?" he asked, after they had picked up milk, juices, bacon, eggs and bread. "Do you all like stew? I've got a good down-home recipe."

"Really? You're full of surprises."

"Yeah," he said laconically, obviously pleased with the compliment.

"I have an idea," she said. "Why don't we just make it a picnic weekend, just casual and easy. We can get sandwich stuff. And maybe some hot dogs and marshmallows—we can cook them in the fireplace. You can make the stew for supper. And I'll make salad."

"Sounds good, lady," he said, brushing the hair from her

face and fixing her intently with those soft, gentle eyes. They stood together for a moment. Kate had a profound sense of peace, and she wondered if that was because she wasn't in love with this man. She broke the mood by getting back to the business of shopping.

When they returned to the cabin, the children were listening to the radio and playing Go Fish with a deck of cards they had found. They made a postcard picture of comfortable domesticity. Bobby Lee stared at the children, squeezed Kate's arm and then went into the kitchen to put the groceries away.

Over a lunch of sandwiches and milk, Bobby Lee asked: "Anybody interested in looking for fossils this afternoon?"

"Fossils?" Josh's interest perked up immediately. "Like in the museum?"

"Yeah. I'll show you. I've got a bunch of 'em." He took Josh's hand and walked him over to a glass case near the fireplace, pointing out bits and pieces of shale and slate, imprinted with the bodies of creatures that had lived tens of thousands of years ago. "See," he said. "I found all of these guys around here. If you wanna go, I'll take you to some good places. All we need is a hammer and a chisel and some good eyes. When we get back, I can fix us some of that good stew for dinner. Okay?" He looked to Kate for the answer.

"Okay," she said. "Sounds interesting to me. I've never looked at fossils in the ground before. You really are full of surprises today."

"I'm tryin', Kate, I really am."

Under Bobby Lee's supervision, they chipped fossils all afternoon. When the children complained they couldn't find any more, he was there, pointing out clues they had missed. Even Kate found herself getting caught up in the game of amateur scientist.

"Wait till I bring these to school," Josh exclaimed. "I'll bet nobody else has anything like these. They're just like the stuff we saw in the museum."

"Know what I'm going to do with mine?" Sarah asked. "I think I'll give them for Christmas presents. That's original, isn't it?"

"Good idea," Bobby Lee agreed. "I can show you how to mount 'em, if you like. They look real good on a smooth piece of wood. Or even glass."

When the afternoon light started to fade, they returned to

the cabin. The children went back to their card games, while Bobby Lee and Kate prepared the evening meal.

They ate in front of a roaring fire, picnic-style, and Kate was pleasantly surprised at the ease and comfort of it all. Was it because she wasn't in love with Bobby Lee? In *like* certainly, but in love was probably not in the cards. Was that the only way to avoid all the usual male-female clichés, the games, the roller-coaster rides that took you soaring high one minute and crashing down the next? Too bad that heavy liking didn't go far enough, at least not for her.

When the children got sleepy, they were tucked into two of the cabin's three knotty-pine beds. From a large pine trunk, Bobby Lee took a down sleeping bag. "Come on," he said to Kate.

"Where?"

"Outside. Under the stars. It's pretty out there."

"It looks cold."

"You won't be cold."

"All night?" Kate was filibustering, and she knew it. She and Bobby Lee had shared some affectionate hugging and kissing, but nothing passionate. She hadn't questioned that, because physically he was neutral for her. She was neither drawn nor repelled. Now it seemed he had something a little more intimate in mind, and she was a little apprehensive. "We can't leave the children here alone. If they wake up, they might get frightened."

"We won't leave them here alone for long. I just want to be with you, Kate. We can leave them a note and say we'll be back in a little while."

A few minutes later, Kate found herself lying in a field where wildflowers had bloomed all summer, snuggled together with Bobby Lee in the sleeping bag, under a star-studded indigo sky. It was peaceful and quiet, except for the sound of their breathing and the night noises of crickets. The warmth from their bodies gentled the crisp edges of the autumn night. He burrowed against her, like a child needing shelter. His hands slid under her sweater, seeking the comfort of skin against skin. He made love with an urgency that surprised her, yet with the same instinctive awareness of her he always showed.

For her, making love in this place, with this man was easy, uncomplicated, no fireworks, no hunger, no all-consuming need. Just a simple human response to someone else's needs. It felt nice to give that to a man she liked.

Together they drifted with the moment. She stroked his head and listened to the steady rhythm of his breathing against her neck. "Don't leave me," he whispered. And suddenly she was sad because she had no answers for the questions he was asking.

The following morning, after every bit of their huge breakfast had been consumed, Bobby Lee took Sarah and Josh and Kate out to a grove of apple trees. He took pictures of them all mugging, playing and scrambling among the fallen leaves. He showed the children how to operate the cameras, patiently explained shutter settings and rules of composition, then stood by as they shot one roll of film after another, trying out the skills he had shown them.

When they came back to the cabin to pack up for the trip home, Kate realized the time had passed quickly, in spite of her misgivings about how they would fill it, about how they would all get along together.

The ride back was quiet. Josh was given the front seat and there was no more carsickness. Kate and Sarah catnapped in the back. From time to time, Kate opened her eyes to look at Bobby Lee, to remember how sweet he had been with the children. He'd be a good father, she thought. He remembered what it was like to be a child. Not for the first time, she wished she could love him, could feel more than affection and gratitude.

## Chapter 23

"THIS really isn't such a great environment for the kids," Harry complained, as he sat in Kate's living room, warming to the subject of his latest *discussion*.

She wanted to say, "I can't afford a great environment, I've told you that before." But she barricaded her temper carefully. Temper toward Harry was as much a luxury as a great environment while she was still dependent on Harry's checks. "Paul thought it was pretty good," she said, hoping the name of one of his best clients would work in her favor. "Besides, it's walking distance to P.S. 41, and that means we don't have to spend any money on private schools."

"Yeah, well, that part's good, but that crowd you had here the other day—couldn't get a good look, maybe you didn't want me to, but it didn't seem like a family crowd to me."

"It wasn't any kind of a crowd, Harry. They were my friends. I don't think it's your place to choose my friends."

They sat in silence, scowling at one another, then turned at the sound of the door buzzer. Kate got up and pressed the button that would let her visitor in. It had to be Bobby Lee. He had said something about coming over to fix some fried chicken for dinner.

He ambled into the apartment, cast a gentle smile and a general "Hi" that included both Harry and Kate. She followed his lead and made a general introduction. "Bobby Lee, this is Harry," she said, omitting any descriptive phrases or clarification.

The two men nodded. "I'll just get the chicken started," Bobby Lee said.

When he left the room, Harry turned to Kate, scowling so

hard he was almost quivering with the strain. "Since when is *that* a fixture around here?"

"Keep your voice down, Harry. He's not a fixture, as you put it. He's my friend, and that makes him welcome. Which is a lot more than I can say for some people."

He ignored the dig, too intent on his own indignation. "Then there's something wrong with the way you think, Kate. Look at him, for God's sake, the man looks like a hippie dropout. You let him waltz in and out of here whenever he wants? With my children living here? This is making me question your judgment, this, and everything else you've done since we split up. One thing I was always sure of was that you were a good mother. But I've seen a lot of changes, and I don't think much of them. You used to be a solid kind of person with good values. Now—all these people you run around with, all the things you do—sometimes I wonder if the kids wouldn't be better off with me."

She had only been half-listening to Harry's litany of complaints. She had long since accepted this ritual as the price she paid for the checks he sent her. But his last words struck at her very being, brought out some atavistic, primal fury. Suddenly a snarling animal mother, hatred was blazing in her eyes as she choked out a warning: "Don't ever say that again, Harry. Don't even think it. If you ever, oh, if you ever, I promise you'll live to regret it."

He stared at her for a long moment, as if he had never seen her before, not this creature, completely unpoised by raw, primitive emotion. "Don't get yourself into a state, Kate. I didn't mean anything. Look, I'd better go now. This doesn't seem to be the time to have a serious discussion."

He left quietly, but she knew she hadn't heard the last of his surprises. Marriage didn't seem to be too lasting these days, she thought, but divorces certainly seemed to go on and on and on.

Harry's pique manifested itself a month later, long enough for him to deny that there was anything personal in his latest financial cutback. The check was diminished, with a brief explanatory note to the effect that his economic situation was strained, and this would mean a reduction in what he could give her. He wished he could do more, *et cetera*, *et cetera*.

She knew him well enough to figure out cause and effect. She had angered him, so he would punish her. She had realized

early on that if she cried a lot, if she acted helpless and lost, that he would do the best he could to keep her comfortable. She realized now that he resented anything she did that might resemble success, that might bring her happiness without him.

This latest cut would mean that Josh couldn't have the guitar lessons she'd promised, that Sarah couldn't . . . then she stopped herself. No, she wouldn't think like that. She'd simply have to find a way to make up the difference. She was already a little overextended, but something would come along. She'd just tell Josh he'd have to wait a couple of months to start.

Her kids were wonderfully understanding. After that first flurry of confusion and complaints, they had not made her feel their disappointments. These days they made certain that their enjoyment of Harry's more lavish life-style did not seem like a rebuke to her. They simply accepted treats when they were offered, along with the reality that Kate gave them what she could.

Kate looked at the pile of letters on her desk. Some days they seemed quite intimidating, quite different from the experiment she'd done for Ross. These came from real people, who expected something real from her.

"You're a natural," Ross had said. "You're a good listener. Most of the time, the reader will just want to get something off her chest. Or to ask you something she'd ask a friend. When it's something else, something technical, you can use the research department to find the appropriate references. When it's something completely off the wall—well, then, we'll have a few form letters that will cover you."

It had sounded perfectly reasonable at the time. Ross must know what he's doing, she told herself. He's made a lot of money in this business. And lasted a long time—two remarkable achievements in a business that was chancier than the stock market. Ross knows what he's doing, even if I don't.

She closed her eyes, picked out a letter and began to read: "Dear Kate, I never seem to be able to finish anything I start. I always start diets or projects around the house, and then I run out of steam. I'm completely disgusted with myself. Do you have any advice that will help me stick to whatever I begin?" It was signed "Procrastinator."

She slid a fresh piece of paper into the typewriter. "Dear Procrastinator," she began. "Make yourself realistic goals. Don't expect to lose twenty pounds or to paint the kitchen in one step. Take your projects one small step at a time. Reward

yourself each time you complete a step and be understanding when you slip."

There, she said to herself, that wasn't so hard. She took another letter from the pile. This one was from a woman who was set on a collision course with her mother-in-law. Definitely a getting-things-off-my-chest letter, she thought as she read the lengthy litany of complaints. This would take a little more consideration, she decided. Kate had no personal experience with in-laws. Her own parents were dead, and Harry's parents had moved to Florida shortly after her marriage. Their contacts had been limited to occasional letters and twice-a-year visits, during which they stayed at a hotel. She had never felt the kind of pressures described by the letter-writer.

She reread the complaints: "Makes herself at home without being invited . . . interferes with the way I raise my children . . . criticizes my clothes . . . calls me at inconvenient times . . ." and so on. It sounded as if "Fed Up" had a low threshold of tolerance where her mother-in-law was concerned. Not to mention a problem standing up for her own territorial rights. Kate understood that. It was hard for many women to say anything negative. It wasn't nice, it wasn't polite. But neither was silent resentment, where you smiled on the outside and destroyed your stomach lining on the inside.

"Talk to your mother-in-law," Kate urged "Fed Up." "Maybe you'll be pleasantly surprised. Maybe she'd rather make a friend of her daughter-in-law than get her own way." Kate hoped this was true.

She heard the giggling, the sound of Josh's voice reading out loud. She walked into the children's bedroom. "Having fun?" she said.

The two children started, looking furtively at the handful of reader's letters on Josh's bed. "Yeah," he said. "You didn't tell us you were doing such good stuff."

"Sure I did. Maybe you weren't paying attention. You think this is good stuff?"

"Yeah," Josh said. "This is much better than the other junk you were doing. It's like Ann Landers."

"Well, I'm glad you approve."

"So what are you going to tell this woman—the one who thinks her roommate is a lesbian?"

"What do you think I should tell her?"

"Uh-uh, I asked you first."

"I don't know yet. When I answer the letter, you can read it. And what do you know about lesbians, anyway?"

"I know a lot," Josh said confidently. "Robbie and I watch them sometimes in front of Rosewater's. That's a gay bar, in case you didn't know."

"No, I didn't," Kate said solemnly. "Thanks for the information."

"It's okay. I know you don't have much time to hang out anymore."

"Well, since you're doing the hanging out for both of us—I gather you had some questions about lesbians?"

"Nah. Robbie's brother told us all about it. He's gonna take us to that Italian movie, *City of Women*, it's all about lesbians. If it's okay with you?"

"Well, I don't know. Maybe I should take you, if you really want to see it."

"Sure, if we can take Robbie, too. But I don't think you'll like it."

"Why not?"

"It's not like the romantic stuff you like. It's all about these women and they have this convention and this guy goes there by mistake. Then this motorcycle lesbian kidnaps him, and she tries to force him to have sex with her, only he gets saved by this old lady..."

Kate bit back a smile. "It sounds very interesting. Did Robbie's brother tell you why a lesbian would want to kidnap a man?"

Josh thought for a minute, a puzzled frown on his face. Then the light of an idea crossed his face. "Maybe she wanted a change," he said hopefully.

Kate laughed in spite of herself. "I think maybe we'd better see more movies together for a while. I think you're getting way ahead of me."

"Okay," he agreed, "if I get to pick."

She wondered how parents managed to keep up with children these days. Her children seemed so much smarter and more sophisticated than she was as a child. When she was Josh's age, Kate's search for sexual information was limited to furtive forays in the pages of *National Geographic* or the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Now she was being educated all over again, in different and unexpected ways. Although she had tried so hard to keep up during her marriage, she now felt as if she had somehow spent

those years in a kind of insulating chamber, a place where the real world was one layer removed from the life she had made, caring for Harry and their children.

With Harry gone, it was as if, for better or worse, the insulation had gone, exposing her to a world that was much more immediate and demanding and more satisfying: new situations and new people, demanding that she think for herself, respond and grow.

## Chapter 24

MARGO dressed carefully for her lunch with Fabrizio. Certainly she wanted to present herself as Mario's wife; she was not naive enough to imagine she could have secured Fabrizio's attention otherwise. Yet she did want to convey something else. She wanted to suggest that she did have something to offer, that she knew something about the publishing business, that there was more to her than the attractive woman and charming hostess he saw in Mario's home.

She wore a black wool suit that had cost a small fortune. It was utterly simple and immaculately tailored. Her striking model's figure carried it beautifully. She added a red silk blouse for color and chose a pair of matching ruby earrings. She had reluctantly asked her manicurist to trim her nails the day before. She wanted her hands to look competent as well as decorative. She wore plain black pumps and had exchanged her usual daytime handbag for one that looked like a briefcase.

Although she hated sitting in restaurants alone, she made certain that she arrived first. This was business, not an assignation, and there was nothing to be gained by suggesting she was coy or frivolous. After the headwaiter had shown her to her table, she ordered a white wine spritzer. She took a leather-bound notebook and her Elsa Peretti pen out of the handbag and started to go over the checklist that she and Kate had rehearsed.

By using certain key phrases, she was to give Fabrizio the idea that she could, with her taste and understanding of American tastes and preferences, make a real contribution to his magazine. If necessary, she would admit to some gaps in her background. At the same time, she would express confidence in her ability to quickly acquire whatever new skills she needed.

Fabrizio arrived five minutes after the appointed time. She extended her hand and smiled warmly. "I'm sorry if I've kept you waiting, Margo," he said.

"Not at all," she answered, still smiling. "The time was well spent," she added, indicating that she was a busy person who knew how to make every moment count.

"Well," he said, after he had given the waiter his order for a dry martini. "I must say all of this is quite unexpected—and quite delightful. I never dreamed when I came to your home last week that we'd be talking business. In fact, I didn't know that you were working at all."

She smiled again. This was the time for the cover story she and Kate had invented. "You know, of course, how busy Mario is. And our son is in school all day. I have adequate household help. Naturally this has given me the opportunity to get back into the mainstream again. It's almost un-American not to work these days, whether one needs the money or not. There's a great deal of satisfaction to be gained by the constant exercise of skills, but I'm sure I don't have to tell you that."

"And Mario," he said, "what does Mario think about your working?"

"Mario has given me his blessing," she lied, "as long as I can maintain the smooth operation of our household. Which is not really too difficult when you are well organized."

"My congratulations. I have always felt that you were an extraordinary woman."

She nodded her head and raised her glass, in acknowledgment of the compliment.

He answered the gesture. "I'll tell you a little more about our new venture," he said. "We feel there is a gap in the American magazine market. So many publications cater to what the typical American woman is not: ridiculously slender, affluent, at leisure. They seem to ignore the woman who works because she has to, and not because she wants a career. The woman who is forced to make serious choices when she spends a dollar. We want our models to look exactly like the woman who lives in middle America: not so young, not so beautiful, not so thin. We want our home decorating department to offer interesting possibilities that don't cost a great deal. We want our recipes to feature foods that are found in the local supermarket, that are inexpensive but not depressing. Basically we want to offer a little style, but a reachable style. Do you see what I'm driving at?"

"Of course," she said. "It's a brilliant concept."

He nodded. "We have done very well in Italy with exactly the same concept. Ours is the leading magazine in our own country. We believe we can do the same here if we have the right team—people who understand and believe in what we are doing. We have hired an editor-in-chief. She has a great deal of magazine experience, and she speaks Italian. This was important, we felt, since she will be in close touch with our Milan office throughout this operation. We are leaving the hiring of an articles editor to her. The choice of a managing editor will be a joint decision. A key position, since so much of this magazine will be visual, is that of art director. We will fill that position from Milan. Another vital spot is that of fashion and beauty editor."

Now Margo sat up straighter. Here he was heading into territory that interested her.

"Since we spoke," he continued, "I have thought about you in connection with this position. This will be a critical job, because whoever has it will be completely responsible for the direction and decision-making in everything to do with fashion and beauty. She will work very closely with our art director to achieve precisely the image we want."

"I see," she said.

"I must tell you, however, that I have one major reservation where you are concerned. You live in another world, a different environment from the one inhabited by our potential readers. I wonder if your existence has not been too—too . . ."

"Rarefied?"

"Exactly so. Your handbag, for example, it is crocodile, French?"

"Italian."

"Ah, well, it is certainly lovely. But I suspect it cost more than the average reader would spend on an entire outfit."

"You're probably right," she agreed. "But," she said, deciding at once to turn what he saw as weakness into strength, "quality isn't always a question of price. Luxury, yes, that's another matter. But I would think that you want to offer your readers the very best they can get for their money, to show them ways to make the most of what they can afford. Isn't that so? After all, you don't want to sell mediocrity—to tell women they should be content with it because it's all they can afford. That concept, Fabrizio, is totally un-American. The dream here is always to reach a little further." She watched him carefully

as she spoke, saw the expression on his face change and watched him smile as she finished.

"My compliments, Margo, you have obviously given some careful thought to this project of ours. Now, why don't we enjoy our lunch, and we can talk a little further about your background over coffee?"

As she waited for Mario that evening, dressed in his favorite negligee, scented with his favorite perfume, Margo was filled with excitement and more than a little apprehension. She realized that the years she had spent as his wife, stroking his clients, helping him cultivate people who might one day be useful, that those years had taught her a great deal and had made her comfortable with people like Fabrizio. Now she wondered how Mario would react to the use of the education she had acquired as his wife.

She said nothing during dinner. She had tried to create a particularly pleasant and relaxed atmosphere—to give her husband the subliminal message that nothing important need change if she took this next important career step.

"I had lunch with Fabrizio today," she said, as Mario warmed his after-dinner brandy between his palms.

"Ah, yes," he said, arching his eyebrows in that way she had always thought was devastatingly sexy. "And how was your meeting?"

"It went very well," she said. "He offered me a position."

"Really." She couldn't tell whether he was amused or annoyed.

"Yes. I'm very excited." She smiled, trying to sound reasonable and conciliatory. "And I'm very grateful to you."

"Really," he repeated in the same ironic tone.

"Well, of course. I believe Fabrizio is giving me this opportunity because he believes I can do the job. He's too good a businessman to do anything else. But I can't imagine I would have had such ready access to a man like Fabrizio, if it hadn't been for his connection with you."

He looked at her, a quizzical expression on his face. "You are just full of surprises these days, aren't you, my dear?"

"I don't understand."

"No," he said. "I don't suppose you do." The look in his eyes told her he was not going to share his private musings.

Yet she felt she had to push on. "Mario, I know you're concerned that this job will somehow interfere with . . . things

at home. I promise that won't happen. Our marriage is important to me; you know that . . ." she trailed off.

He sipped the last of his brandy. "We'll see," he said. He left the table and went directly to his room. She knew she had been dismissed for the night.

She would have felt easier had he taken her to bed and given her the reassurance that he desired her. But of course he wouldn't, not when he was displeased with her. And curiously, she respected him for punishing her.

Margo had always felt that kindness and tenderness in a man were much overrated. She preferred her relationships as she preferred her sex, with a hint of combat, a seasoning of cruelty. She had never thought of Mario as a kind or a good man. He was, to her, desirable and exceptional—a man who had to be kept at bay. And this, she supposed, was why their relationship had never palled for her.

There was rarely an opportunity for complacency. She may have become restless within herself, but never could she be bored with the marriage. She wanted her husband now as much as she had in the beginning. Even in the best of times, she could never be quite certain that she had him, and that was one of the reasons he was forever interesting to her.

Margo's initiation into the ranks of *Bellissima's* editorial staff was a hectic, breath-holding experience. She had to act the role of the seasoned, knowledgeable professional, while listening at the same time for clues that would precisely define the mechanics of her job. She knew that to say the wrong thing would be worse than saying nothing at all.

The first few days were spent in meetings with an executive team from Milan. She found, to her relief, that they were here to talk about generalities, about goals and basic concepts, rather than the nuts and bolts of production.

She discovered that during the initial phase of the project, she would be expected to employ free-lancers, rather than regular staff. This, Kate assured her, was all to the good. She would be able to put into operation the Henry Ford principle of employing people to carry out tasks she could not perform. She could learn from them, use them, and then, when it was time to hire full-time staff, she would be a much more knowledgeable executive.

In spite of Kate's support and her own determination, Margo found her first days on the job exhausting. Perversely, Mario,

who was usually out of town several days a week, seemed to be making a conscious effort to stay in the city. He was alert, she knew, to any signs of slippage in her marital duties, watchful for any clues that she was neglecting him or their son.

At the end of the day, she was utterly worn out. Yet she forced herself to bathe, to dress for dinner, to supervise homework and to offer Mario the small attentions he had come to expect. She didn't know if she could keep up this pace indefinitely, but she did know that she meant to keep this job.

The first quarrel erupted when the Italians running the magazine called a weekend meeting. It was understood that when Mario was in town, they would spend weekends at their house upstate. With the help of a local cleaning woman and a part-time gardener-handyman, Margo maintained the same level of homemaking there that she did in the city. She shopped for all the delicacies that were not available upstate, transported these to their car, then cooked for her son and husband while they played tennis, skied or sailed their boat on their private lake. As this weekend approached, she said to Mario: "I can't go to the country this time," and waited for the explosion she knew would follow.

"Oh?" he said. "Why not?"

"Fabrizio and some of the other Italians are coming in for an important meeting. I'm expected to be there. It's really necessary, Mario. I'm sorry . . ."

"Yes," he said, "I'm sorry, too."

She waited for him to say what was surely on his mind, the "I told you so," the reminder that obviously she could not hold an important position without neglecting him. But he didn't say it. She had the uncomfortable feeling that Mario was keeping a secret dossier. As much as she wanted this job, she was not willing to trade her marriage for it. "I'm sorry," she said again, not knowing what else she could offer in her own defense.

## Chapter 25

KATE looked into the absinthe smokiness of Bobby Lee's eyes, trying to find the words to say "No" without making it a statement of rejection. Moments before they had been in her kitchen, talking and laughing. She had been making Sunday brunch. He had come around behind her, circled her waist with his arms and buried his face in her hair.

"Smells nice," he whispered.

"Doesn't it though? I love the smell of frying bacon."

"Not the bacon," he said huskily. "You."

"Oh," she said, surprised, for Bobby Lee wasn't given to easy compliments. "Thank you."

"Everything about you is nice."

"You're nice, too," she said, a little perfunctorily, though of course she did believe he was.

"Wanna get married?"

"What?" She could not quite believe her ears. Bobby Lee had been a good friend and a sweet, tender lover, but she had never, not in her most idle imaginings, thought of him as a husband. And she had never imagined that Bobby Lee had entertained a different set of fantasies where she was concerned.

"I said, do you want to marry me?" His tone was a little less casual now.

"I don't know what to say," she stalled, knowing even as she said the words that Bobby Lee might understand what they meant. "I don't think I'm ready to get married," she said, meaning I might consider it one day, but not with you.

The look in his eyes told her he knew what was behind the words. "Okay," he said softly. "Just thought I'd ask."

She started to say something, touching his face to soften the *no* that hung there, separating the two of them.

"It's okay," he repeated, taking her hand, squeezing it for a moment, then replacing it gently at her side. "I'm okay. It's not that big a deal."

But she knew that he was lying now. It wasn't okay and she didn't know how to make it better. She didn't want to lose Bobby Lee any more than she wanted to marry him. She suspected that she had just made the only choice that was hers to make.

She said nothing when Bobby Lee didn't spend that night on her couch. She made no protest when his visits became shorter and less frequent, when he no longer invited her to come to his place. When Josh asked about his diminishing presence, she answered with a reassurance, that Bobby Lee still liked them all, but that he had a lot on his mind.

One evening, when he turned up at eight o'clock, asking for a cup of coffee and giving no other explanation for his presence, she tried to talk to him. "Bobby Lee," she began.

"Hush," he said, putting his finger to her lips. "We don't really have to talk about it, do we?"

She knew she was losing him, and all she could think of was how the same things seemed to happen, over and over, for different reasons. Harry had left because she wasn't quite right for him. Now Bobby Lee was drifting off because she was too right for him.

"Come to my place," he said simply. "I want you to."

She asked for no explanations, arranged for a neighbor to look in on the children and went with him, in silence, to the small studio apartment.

They made love in silence, and to Kate, it seemed as if he had never been more gentle and tender as he was that night. Their intimacy had a sad and poignant quality, uncluttered with words of explanation or recrimination or regret.

Later, he got up quietly and made a pot of herb tea, which he brought to bed, along with two thick china mugs. They drank the tea together, and there was something almost cozy about the quiet. "You've been so good for me, Kate," he said finally.

"And you've been good for me." She wanted to say "Don't go," but she couldn't.

On the way back to her apartment, he stopped at an all-night vendor and bought a bunch of violets. He presented these

to her with a small bow. "For you, Kate," he said. "Just because."

He brought her to her door, dropped a kiss on the top of her head and left. After he had gone, she realized he hadn't said "See you," his usual form of farewell.

He did not call again. She knew that she could always pick up the phone and ask him to come back. And she knew it wouldn't be fair to Bobby Lee if she did that. For all his easygoing ways, he had a need to be rooted. He needed a home, someone to shelter him. And Kate knew that all she could offer was a temporary resting place.

## Chapter 26

MARGO and Kate sat facing each other across the small bistro table at La Gauloise. It was one of their favorite places for light drinking and heavy conversation.

"My treat," Margo insisted as they ordered, "this is a real business meeting, and I need all the advice you can give me."

"My advice? You must be kidding. I'm still in shock over the way you got this job. Not that I have any doubts about you. But with all due respect, this is a *big* job. I always thought people had to have years of experience to get jobs like this. I thought you worked hard, got promotions or maybe got lucky while you searched the want ads in *The New York Times*. I didn't think you could have a ten-minute conversation with somebody at a cocktail party and then, poof, instant executive."

"Then there *is* something I can teach you," Margo laughed. "Nobody ever got a really important job searching *The New York Times*, darling. And all that business about climbing through the ranks—well, Mario taught me that doesn't happen very often in the real world. Take a mediocre job, and the chances are you'll stay there. Maybe when you're very young and very clever and very hungry, just maybe that's different. But at our age—uh-uh. I'm convinced all the really marvelous opportunities get passed out at cocktail parties or over lunch at somebody's club. I don't have time to start at the bottom, Kate, or even at the middle. And I wouldn't want to. But this—this is really exciting. The money's good, too. Even Mario can respect the salary I'm getting. I like that. I like the idea of showing him that I'm worth something in his world. Oh, if I can do this, Kate, if I can really do this, it would mean so much to me. That's why I need your help, because I do have to deliver. I don't deceive myself about that."

Kate thought that she had never seen Margo look so alive. Her eyes were sparkling, and she seemed to be fairly brimming with excitement. "Do you realize," Kate said, "how different you sound today? How different we both are? Just a little while ago, the biggest business we ever handled was a booth at the school Christmas Fair? And here we are—two scheming, ambitious women. How do you suppose we got corrupted so fast?"

Margo laughed. "I love it—scheming, ambitious women. It's in the air, Kate. We caught it because it's there."

"Is that it, do you think? A social trend, like bobby socks and hula hoops?"

"Could be, darling. But I've always been ambitious, in a different way. I've always wanted more. I thought the way to do it was to climb on some man's shoulders, to marry well, as we used to say. And Mario, well, he was a case of having my cake and eating it. I didn't have to choose between love and money; I've had it all. Now it's rather fun to think about buying my own cake, instead of depending entirely on Mario to furnish it."

"Speaking of Mario, how is he taking all this newfound ambition?"

"Actually I've been rather careful to present it in another light. I'm sure he believes this is all just another new toy like my classes in yoga and dance. He probably thinks it will all blow over when I get bored with it. But he isn't terribly thrilled. He thinks the job will make me shirk my duties, as he calls them. What do you think of that?"

"It sounds awful when you put it like that. But in a way, you can't really blame him, Margo. When you got married, he expected you to behave in a certain way and do certain things. And that's the way it's been for a lot of years. You've told me that yourself. Now you're changing. I suppose he feels he has the right to complain."

"Kate!" Margo's blue eyes flashed with surprise and annoyance. "Don't tell me you're taking Mario's side?"

"No, I'm not," Kate soothed. "I'm on your side. But if you're not looking for trouble, it makes sense to understand his point of view."

"That's funny," Margo smiled.

"What?"

"You, trying to be so fair. I have to tell you, Mario's not so impartial where you're concerned."

"Me? Mario and I hardly know each other. We haven't said

more than a dozen words to each other. How could he have an opinion about me?"

"He does. On the basis of the ways I've changed since you and I met."

"You mean he blames me for the changes he doesn't like?"

"Something like that."

Kate frowned. "That makes me uncomfortable. It's like knowing somebody's mother says you can't come over to play because you're a bad influence."

Margo laughed. "It's not quite that bad, Kate. Mario hasn't said I can't play with you. Not yet, anyway. Look, if this bothers you, why don't we give Mario a chance to know you better. I'll give a small dinner party. I'll dig up a spare man to balance the table, and I'll seat you next to Mario. He makes some of his best efforts over dinner. Good food and fine wine are the surest ways to mellow his aristocratic Italian heart."

"Okay, now that we've settled Mario's hash, what about Fabrizio and the job?"

"It's all still terribly preliminary, but as I understand it, I'll be responsible for putting together all the fashion and beauty material for six prototypes. Then those will be test-marketed. When the testing is finished, we go into production."

"Sounds good so far."

"It is. The best part is the year's contract I'm getting up front. They'll think twice about getting rid of me, even if I don't perform brilliantly in the beginning."

"That sounds good, too."

"Now here's the hard part: I won't have any staff while I'm doing the prototypes. I'm it—the whole fashion and beauty department. I can hire free-lancers for individual assignments."

"That's not so bad, Margo. There are always a lot of good people looking for free-lance work. Use one of the professional directories. You can shop around for people with heavy experience. You can pick their brains and learn from them. All you'll have to do is give some direction."

"I'm sure I can do that to a point. But I'll have to do some of the writing myself. Fabrizio thinks I can do the whole job, remember? He thinks I can be their arbiter of taste and an all-round writer-editor, too. That's what sold him. Lucky the Italians aren't really plugged into the whole New York publishing network; otherwise, he might have found himself an unemployed woman's magazine editor with ten years' experience behind her. Now I need him to keep believing that he got

something even better. I need to do some of the writing myself. Will you help me, Kate? I can't pay much right now—I don't want them to know about it. But I can make it up to you, later. . . ."

"Don't be silly. I don't want you to do anything that would make you look bad. When you can pay me, you'll pay me."

"Another thing, I want you to look at some of my 'budget' story ideas. I have every confidence in my own taste, but it's been years since I've had to think about what anything cost. I thought maybe you could be my typical consumer."

"Ah, yes, Kate Sherwood, typical, average American woman: middle-range taste and not much money to spend."

"Oh, Kate, that sounds awfully grim. I didn't mean it that way."

"I know, I'm just teasing. Lord knows I've never been a fashion plate, in spite of Harry's best efforts. And these days I have to be extra careful of what I spend on clothes and cosmetics."

"There, you do understand. I know something about finding sources from my modeling days and from those columns I did for the *Courier*. I know I can work with models and photographers. I understand that world. All I need to do is cover all the gaps in my background. Until I can fill them in."

"Boy, have you come to the right place. Filling gaps is my new specialty. When do we start?"

"Right away. Tell me when you're free, and I'll come to your place. And don't forget about dinner with Mario. I want him to see that you're not some feminist Svengali."

"Right. First item on the agenda: charm Mario."

"Exactly." The two women laughed together, like conspirators. "Neutralize the opposition before they neutralize you."

Yet when the evening of Margo's dinner party came around, Kate was far from confident about her ability to charm Mario. What she hoped for was the chance to show him that she wasn't some kind of contemporary disease that was eroding his wife's character.

Before she dressed, she did some yoga stretches for relaxation. Then she reminded herself to watch her mouth. People like Paul thought she was incredibly innocent. But since her separation, she noticed that she was starting to say things that raised eyebrows. Just for the hell of it. Now that Harry wasn't around to monitor her behavior with dark, disapproving glances,

she found that she occasionally enjoyed being what her mother would have described as fresh. But with Mario she wanted to be careful. He was probably a tougher critic than Harry.

As she put on a taupe silk dress she had found on the Lower East Side, she tried to think positive thoughts. Mario was not an ogre. He loved his wife and son, so all she had to do was convince him she was a suitable playmate for Margo.

Her resolve held until she arrived at Margo's apartment. No sooner had she made her greetings than Mario strode purposefully toward her. In spite of her apprehension, she admired the easy grace of his walk, the effortless elegance with which he wore his beautifully tailored dark suit. He is very attractive, she thought, as he took her hand and brought it to his lips. The gesture was charmingly continental, but when she met his eyes, they were as glacially cool as the smile he gave her.

"Welcome, Kate," he said. "I'm delighted you could come this evening. I feel I've been remiss in not getting to know you better, since you've become such an important member of our household, so to speak." He was still smiling, but she could sense the calculation in his words. "I must tell you," he said, signaling the maid to bring the tray of drinks, "that you seem to exert a rather strong influence on Margo. So naturally I have become rather curious about you."

There. He had not wasted a single moment in getting to the point. Like a businessman, he had stated his purpose without preliminaries. She took a glass of white wine and sipped it, buying a few moments' thinking time.

"Margo and I are good friends," she finally said, smiling and trying to appear perfectly at ease, for her instincts told her that any show of weakness would be a mistake. "Surely Margo has had friends before?"

"Perhaps she has. But I believe this is the first time one of Margo's friends has made such an impression, indirectly, on me."

His directness made her decide against coyness or equivocation. She tried to be as frank as he was. "And this impression has been a negative one." It was a statement, not a question.

"I see Margo has been talking to you."

"Well, of course. Margo and I talk about a great many things. That's what friends do, isn't it? Look," she said, attempting to tackle his disapproval head-on, "I realize that Margo has changed since we've become friends. But I think you might be overestimating my part in that. I can assure you that I've

had my hands full straightening out my own life. I haven't had the energy or the inclination to interfere with Margo's." She sensed that he was studying her as she spoke, his eyes clear and hard and appraising.

"What you say may be true, Kate. Perhaps you haven't realized that there are indirect methods, quite effective, of proselytizing."

"What is that I'm supposed to be proselytizing for?"

"I'm not sure exactly." He frowned, choosing his words carefully. "I've only seen the symptoms. Some sort of women's liberation, I suppose."

She barely managed to suppress the laughter that bubbled up inside her. So that was the bogeyman, or bogeywoman, that worried Mario. In spite of his seeming sophistication, he was afraid of the power of new ideas. "I'm sorry to disappoint you," she said, more relaxed now that she knew what the problem was. "But you won't find any radical feminists under the bed, so to speak. I've been too busy trying to make a living and raise my children to mount any liberation campaigns in your home."

"I see," he smiled again, and this time he seemed to mean it. "I hadn't realized that your concerns were quite so... pragmatic."

She pressed forward in the same direction. "Then perhaps you hadn't realized that whatever liberation I've had was the direct result of my husband's termination of our marriage. I've simply been lucky enough, with a little help from my friends, to find something good out of what I thought was a disaster."

"Ah, there it is," he said, obviously pleased with this last bit of information. "Perhaps that's the secret of your influence on Margo. Your triumph over adversity. She tells me you've made quite a success."

"Margo exaggerates. When I met her, my life was a shambles. So everything good that's happened must seem remarkable. I hope you won't hold that against me. I really do care about Margo, and I'd hate to think that our friendship could cause her problems at home."

"I think you're being entirely too modest. For my benefit, perhaps?" Now he was laughing at her, serving notice that she hadn't succeeded in disarming him. Not quite. "I'll try not to hold anything you've accomplished against you. But you must realize that what you've managed alone is enough to make a woman like Margo question some of her own priorities."

"Only if she was ready to do it anyway," Kate answered quickly. "If I hadn't come along, she might have taken a lover," she said boldly. "Lots of women do that when they start asking themselves hard questions."

His expression darkened, and she thought she had gone too far. "You aren't what I expected, Kate," he said. "I must tell you that I still think you are . . . dangerous." Then he smiled again, all European charm and good manners. "But I'm not quite sure what should be done about you. Perhaps we should find you a new husband; someone who could bring you back into the fold."

"What a charming idea, Mario. But only if you can find someone as attractive as you are," she flirted, hoping to end the conversation on an accommodating note. She knew she hadn't charmed Mario or even neutralized him. But maybe, for the moment, they had achieved a truce.

## Chapter 27

"WOULD you come into my office when you're finished with the column, Kate?"

Uh-oh, she thought. Being a firm believer in the no-news-is-good-news principle, Kate wondered what she'd done wrong. Maybe her answers were getting too somber. Or maybe too flip. There had been that funny letter from the grandmother who was curious about singles bars—Kate hadn't been able to resist. Still, maybe Ross would just let her off with a warning. He wouldn't replace her just like that, not now, not with the latest cutoff of funds from Harry. She couldn't go back to him and beg for money.

The door to Ross's office was open. She stood there waiting for him to invite her in. "Come in, Kate, come in. You look like a kid waiting for the principal."

"Does it show? And here I've been giving other women advice on being confident and self-assured. I feel like a hypocrite."

"Don't. *Confident and self-assured* is like gray hair. It creeps up on you a little at a time. But I don't know if it's ever really an absolute condition. I still blush when my mother talks to me."

"Really?"

"Really. Now sit down so I can talk to you without feeling like the Lord High Executioner. I have, as they say, good news . . . and more good news. Fooled you, didn't I? First, I'm going to give you a raise. You deserve it, and I don't think you have the nerve to ask for it. Am I right? Never mind. But understand it's just this once. Call it an investment in good employee relations. In the future you'll have to fight for what you want and need; take a few nips from the hand that feeds

you. You'll disappoint me if you don't. Now, item number two: I'm sending you on a little foray into the talk-show circuit."

"What!"

"Talk shows, you know, people sitting around selling things. Connie Reardon, our PR person, sends out advance copies of the magazine every month to all her media contacts. Sometimes she gets a nibble here and there, and that helps us sell a few extra copies. Lately the nibbles have included some interest about your column and you. So, Connie wants to send you to Philadelphia and Baltimore and Boston, for starters. Not all on the same day, of course. You'll get expenses, nothing lavish, mind you, just traveling expenses, meals, taxis, that sort of thing. If things go well, I'll think about adding a per diem."

"But Ross, I don't know anything about being on television. I'd be scared out of my mind. I don't think I'd make a good impression or sell any magazines."

"You didn't know anything about writing this column when you started, right? Look how well that's turned out. When are you going to trust my judgment? You'll do just fine. You're attractive, but not in a way that women will find threatening. That will give you credibility, like a neighbor or a friend."

"Thank you, I think. But Ross..."

"You're welcome. No buts. Connie will coach you about what to wear, how to carry yourself, that sort of thing."

When Kate left Ross's office, her stomach was keeping time with her heart. She was thrilled and excited about the raise and terrified at the prospect of appearing on television.

She was not reassured by her session with Connie, who kept shaking her head as she fired instructions. "I'll go with you to the Philadelphia show, after that we'll see. Wear something soft, not fussy, no pants, no black or white—a bright color would be good for you. Keep the hair out of your face. Don't wear your makeup; you can put it on just before the show, so it's fresh. We'll take an early Metroliner from Penn Station. Thursday morning. I'll call you as I'm leaving my apartment; I'll pick you up in a cab and we'll go to the station together."

"But, Connie, we haven't talked about what I'll say. I don't know what I'm expected to do..."

"We have a ten-minute segment, so you won't have to do much this time. We can talk about it on the train. See you on Thursday. Remember, no pants and no black."

\* \* \*

Thursday morning at six, Kate was trying to rub the sleep from her eyes with applications of cold water on a rough terry washcloth. She succeeded in raising an angry bump on her cheek and in accenting the puffiness around her eyes.

She pulled on a pair of clean jeans and a sweater. These would be her traveling clothes, comfortable enough to nap in during the train ride. She had packed a small cosmetics case and her on-camera outfit: a simple tailored burgundy dress, sheer beige pantyhose and a pair of suede pumps. When a single ring on the telephone signaled that Connie was on her way, she kissed her sleeping children and whispered "See you tonight."

The street was quiet and nearly deserted, so she had no trouble spotting the single cab that pulled up to the curb on her corner.

"Morning, Connie," she muttered as she slid into the back seat.

"You look like you're still asleep," Connie observed. "I hope you brought plenty of makeup."

"I brought everything I own. I'm not really at my best in the middle of the night. Next time, maybe we could do an afternoon show? Somewhere close?"

"We'll see. I'm having a video cassette made of the show. If you look too haggard, maybe I can talk Ross into sending you the night before."

The cab made the trip to the station in a few, traffic-free minutes. The train was relatively full of early-morning commuters to Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington.

When the two women were settled in their seats, Connie went to the snack bar and returned with two foam cups of coffee. "Here," she said. "Drink this and pay attention. Then you can nap until we get there."

Kate took a few sips of the bitter black coffee and settled back in her seat.

"Now," Connie began, "the purpose of this appearance is to promote the magazine, using your column as a vehicle. The host of the show will have a copy that he'll hold up at the beginning and end of your segment. If you can slip in the name a few more times, that would be great. But don't be obvious. Viewers have gotten a lot more sophisticated than they used

to be about obvious plugs; a hard sell can be a turn-off if you're not smooth about it. So just be alert to opportunities. For instance, if the host, Hank Rollins, asks how you got started, you could say: 'When I began this column for . . .' As for your image, we've been selling you as a non-expert, an alternative to the shrink columnists. You don't pontificate or diagnose, and you don't hedge the way the experts do. We're selling you as a kind of surrogate relative or friend, the neighbor next door who listens to your problems over a cup of coffee. Who offers a shoulder to cry on, who maybe helps you to think things through. Be soft, gentle, caring. I know that should be easy for you, but being on camera sometimes makes people act stiff. Hank Rollins is a very nice guy; he'll do whatever he can to help you. He's young, but a real pro. I like to put people on his show because he doesn't try to one-up his guests.

"If he asks you something you can't answer, don't be afraid to pause. Say that's something you'd have to give more thought to. There's nothing lost by not having a ready answer; sometimes it's better than firing from the hip. Watch nervous phrases like *uh*, *well* or *you know*. Smile as much as you can. Try to look like you're enjoying yourself. Try to keep your face relaxed. Don't forget to breathe; you'd be surprised at how many people do that. Watch those frowns. You can look thoughtful without puckering up your face. And watch your hands. Don't use them if you can't do it gracefully. Keep them in your lap, folded, not clenched. We don't want to see tension running through your body. Let's see if there's anything else. No, I guess that's it. We can do more after we see this videotape. I'll be able to pick out your mistakes, and we can work specifically where you need it."

"Thanks a lot, Connie. I was nervous before; now I'm paralyzed. I'll be lucky if I don't stare into the camera like the village idiot."

"Oh, I'm glad you mentioned that. There will be more than one camera around. You'll go crazy trying to figure out which way to look. So just look at the interviewer. Talk to him. Let the camera man find you. When you get more experienced, we can get fancy about angles and sides. And don't worry about being nervous. All the best people are nervous. Puts a little pizzazz in your performance, a sparkle in your eye. Those eyes of yours are pretty bloodshot; do you have any drops?"

Kate shook her head.

"Never mind. We'll get some iced tea and soak some cotton

in it. Works almost every time. Now take your nap; I'll wake you up when we arrive."

Kate closed her eyes, slid down into her seat and stretched her legs under the seat in front of her. This entire situation felt so unreal, as if she'd been whisked out of her own life into someone else's. Television cameras. Being interviewed. It all seemed like someone else's dream. More like Harry's than hers. It wasn't that she hated these changes. They just felt unfamiliar. Maybe she would get used to this new life. If she survived Philadelphia.

"Hi, Kate, can I call you Kate? It's nice to meet you. I've read your last three columns. I think we'll have a lot of fun with your segment."

"It's nice to meet you." Kate took the outstretched hand offered by Sharon Hastings, producer of the *Good Morning, Philadelphia* show, thinking how young the woman was. Everyone wrote about how the world was getting older, but to Kate, it seemed as if the opposite were true. People in charge seemed to be getting younger and younger.

"My assistant will take you to our green room. She'll show you where you can freshen up and change. If you like, she'll get you some coffee and Danish. Hank Rollins will come by and say hello before air time. Now, are there any questions I can answer for you?" She smiled reassuringly.

"I—no, I don't think so."

"Don't worry," Sharon said, smiling again. "Everyone's nervous. I understand this is your first time out. You'll do fine; I can tell. Hank's really good with our guests. He'll make you feel at home. And he's very good at covering up fluffs and filling spaces. Just put yourself in his hands."

"Thanks," Kate said, wanting to believe what she'd just heard, still feeling a creeping numbness that threatened to lock her jaws. She followed Sharon's assistant into the station's green room, which reminded her of a high-school restroom. There was a row of sinks, two toilets, a slightly beat-up couch and a reclining lounge chair. Before she could say anything, Connie took charge.

"Okay, Kate, let's get started. Wash your face with cold water, and we'll work on your makeup."

"Would you like some coffee or tea?" Sharon's assistant asked. "We have some coffee cake or sandwiches if you're hungry..."

"I'd like some coffee," Kate said. "Nothing to eat." She felt like her stomach would surely rebel if she pushed food down into her churning gastric juices.

"Coffee for me, too," Connie said. "Now let's see what you've got in this bag. Moisturizer, okay, and use some of this coverup under the eyes. Easy on the eyeshadow. Use this blusher, more than you would on the street. Here, put this contour stuff under the cheekbones."

As Kate worked on her face, Connie shook the dress out of its plastic garment bag. "This is good, Kate, a nice color. It will photograph well. Ladylike, but not prissy."

A tap on the door signaled the arrival of coffee. With Sharon's assistant was a tall, athletic-looking young man. "Kate," the assistant said, "this is Hank Rollins, the host of *Good Morning, Philadelphia*. Hank—Kate Sherwood. She does the 'Back Fence' column."

"Hi, Kate. Welcome to Philadelphia. I just wanted you to get a look at me, so you wouldn't swoon on camera."

Kate laughed nervously. "Hi, Hank. Everyone says you can make any guest look good. I'm counting on that."

Hank smiled. "That's right, Kate. There's no way you're going to look bad on my show. I'd tell you not to be nervous, but that would be dumb. You have every right to be a little tense. This is new for you; I do it every day. I like the interview to be spontaneous, but I'll give you one question in advance, so you can think about what you want to say. Once we get started, you'll be fine. Why don't I ask you about the funniest letter you've ever had? How's that?"

"Okay, I can manage that."

"Sure you can. Then we'll talk about the magazine—your PR lady will kill me if we don't. And we'll chat, just like we're doing now. If we have time, we'll take a few phone calls."

"Phone calls?" Kate repeated.

"Phone calls. Didn't anyone tell you? We have a phone-in format. Gives our viewers a chance to ask the guests questions."

"Oh, my God," Kate whispered. "All this is live?"

"Easy, easy," Hank laughed. "Don't panic. Yes, it's live, but it will be okay. Look, I'll make you a promise—we won't take any calls unless it's going really well. And if we take a call and you have trouble with it, I'll say we're running out of time. This may seem awfully chaotic to you, but it's everyday stuff here. We have a lot more control than you'd think. We

choreograph everything that goes on. You just get yourself into the seat next to mine, and we'll take off together."

Kate nodded numbly. Her voice seemed to have left her. She dressed herself with icy fingers, wishing that she were home in bed. Safe, instead of waiting to make a fool of herself. In front of thousands of viewers, who would surely write negative letters to Ross, who would finally have second thoughts about Kate.

To Kate, everything she achieved since Harry left her, all of it, seemed to be a series of accidents. Just dumb luck and circumstances. She couldn't connect any of the good things with any talent or ability on her part. She was more than ready to take the responsibility for things that went wrong. But when things went well, she was certain it was a mistake. That it was only a matter of time before she'd be exposed as a perfectly ordinary woman, with nothing special to recommend her.

She allowed herself to be led out of the green room, nodded mutely at Connie's "Good luck," nodded again when Sharon's assistant signaled "Five minutes."

They threaded their way past the cables and lights in the small studio, past the cameras, where everyone else seemed to know what was happening. She took her seat in a comfortable upholstered chair on a small elevated platform that made up the set of *Good Morning, Philadelphia*. Between her chair and the one Hank would occupy, there was a round Formica coffee table, holding several copies of the magazine and a telephone, which gleamed, black and sinister, with all its buttons waiting to be lit up.

Her heart accelerated. She craved a cigarette, a Valium, anything that would take her mind off the jackhammer tempo of her racing pulse. She wondered if it was possible to faint from fright. She tried to remember if she'd gone to the bathroom and immediately wished she had.

A camera man passed a light meter in front of her face to do something called taking a level. Sharon waved, mouthing the words "You look nice."

Kate remembered Connie's instructions to smile. She did so, and kept smiling as Hank took his seat and patted her hand, which had turned to frozen stone. She smoothed her dress, looked into the nearest monitor and recoiled. She fastened her eyes on Hank, hearing the countdown, as if it were coming from a distance.

She watched Hank take his working pose and envied him

his ease, as he began smoothly. "Good morning, Philadelphia. Sometimes we all need a little help with our problems. Sometimes we all need a friend, a shoulder to cry on. Our first guest is just that, a friend in need—a columnist for *Woman's Week*." He held up the magazine, then turned to her. "I'm sure you get many different kinds of letters from readers, Kate. What was the funniest?"

"Well, Hank." She mentally congratulated herself for using the man's name and scolded herself for the *well*. "Sometimes readers like to write with tongue in cheek . . ." And finally she was off. The words were coming out, almost with their own volition. She kept looking at Hank, trying to keep her voice steady, her lips smiling, her hands unclenched and her brow unfurrowed, all at the same time.

She was okay, she kept telling herself. Then Hank looked at the telephone, which was now showing every button lit. "Well, Kate," he smiled, "it seems as if our viewers have some questions for you."

She smiled weakly at the first voice, surprisingly a man's. "My problem," he said, "is that I'm in love with a woman I've been seeing for several months. I want to get married, and she says she needs more time. How can I get her to see things my way?"

This was a familiar question. Kate had answered it dozens of times, except usually it came from women. She began with the same advice she gave eager women, in love with less-than-eager men. "You can't hurry a commitment, any more than you can hurry love. Sometimes timing is just as important as love. The woman in your life obviously needs the time and space to make up her own mind . . ."

Miraculously, the ten minutes were gone. And Sharon's assistant was leading her off the set. She exhaled noisily, as if she had been holding her breath until this very moment. "Feels good, huh?" the young woman asked.

"Wonderful," Kate agreed.

"You did fine," Connie said. "Ross is going to be pleased. I think you will, too, when you see the tape. By the time you get to Boston, you'll be a pro."

"I should live so long," Kate muttered, and all she could think of was getting home and going to sleep.

## Chapter 28

"You had a phone message from a Dr. Greg Hardy," the receptionist said, as Kate swung by her to drop off the copy for her column. "It's in there with the rest of your messages, but he asked me to be sure to tell you. He seemed anxious to talk to you."

"I'll bet," Kate said sourly. "He's probably a medical obscene caller. Maybe he'll invite me into a phone booth for something unspeakable. Boy, I didn't know this television business was going to bring all the weirdos out of the woodwork. You wouldn't believe the strange calls I've been getting. Some of them don't even talk. They just sort of breathe at you. I've had to get an unlisted phone. I feel like asking Ross for a raise or combat pay, at least."

"Not today, Kate," the woman cautioned. "He loves you dearly, but our beloved leader is in a lousy humor."

Kate took the pile of phone messages to her own desk. She wondered if she should talk with Ross to see what was bothering him, then decided that might be presumptuous. All they had shared was a casual flirtation and some pleasant moments. They weren't really friends, and after her talk with her friends, Kate knew she should firmly put any ideas of *more* out of her mind.

She looked at the top message. Dr. Greg Hardy. It had a nice, clean professional sound. She picked up the receiver and dialed. After two rings, a deep, rather youthful-sounding voice answered: "Greg Hardy here."

"Dr. Hardy, this is Kate Sherwood. Returning your call."

"Hi, Miz Sherwood. Thanks for calling. I've wanted to talk with you ever since I saw you on that cable show."

Uh-oh, she thought. I knew it. Another one.

"I liked some of the things you said. I thought it might be worthwhile if we met and talked."

She did not answer. Sensing her hesitation, he went on. "Look, if you're not comfortable with the idea, you can talk to Ross Benson and his wife. We've met on a number of occasions. I think they'll vouch for me."

Kate was not about to ask Ross *or* his wife for a reference, but the fact that he had named them eased her anxiety. "All right, Dr. Hardy. When would you like to meet?"

"Friday night? Dinner?"

Kate was surprised. She had thought he might suggest lunch or drinks, the usual convivial settings for business meetings. Was this then supposed to be a date? Friday night did have a certain social quality to it. She tried to mask her confusion with her best career-woman voice. "Friday night is fine. Where shall we meet?"

"Why don't I pick you up? Unless you have some objection?"

"No," she said tentatively and gave him her address. "About seven-thirty?"

"That's good. I look forward to meeting you, Kate."

She noticed his use of her first name. "See you Friday, Dr. Hardy."

Kate's reaction, when she opened the door to admit Greg Hardy was: My God, he's a child. And then she took a closer look. His expression was open, ingenuous, soft brown eyes set in a finely lined cherub's face, framed with a curly cap of sandy hair. There was a youthful stance to his medium frame dressed in the style that Kate called aging preppie—tan cotton slacks, a white button-down shirt, rep tie and navy pullover.

Something about him suggested innocence, and Kate thought that if he was a medical doctor, he was certainly in the right profession. His face invited trust, forbade any suspicion of guile or deception or professional sleight-of-hand. With me, his expression said, what you see is what you get.

She extended her hand. "Dr. Hardy, hello."

"Greg, please, even my patients call me Greg."

"You're in medicine then?"

"Psychiatry. I don't know if it's really medicine. Some people call it witchcraft. Or religion. I like to think of it as healing, Kate. May I call you Kate? It will save some time. . ."

Time? she wondered. Save time for what? "Of course," she said. "Can I offer you a drink?"

"Why don't I take a raincheck on that. I don't want you to

fuss right now. I want your undivided attention as soon as possible. Why don't we just go out? Right now."

"All right," she agreed. She went to the closet for a coat, hoping that her blazer and slacks would serve for whatever he had in mind.

"I thought we'd go somewhere in Soho," he said, as they descended the five flights of stairs. "Maybe Raoul's, if it's not too crowded. Do you feel like walking? If not, we can grab a cab right here."

"No," she said. "I like to walk."

"Wonderful," he said, taking her arm, in a gesture that hinted at more than professional interest.

What does this man want, she wondered, as she made small talk between her apartment and the restaurant. After they were seated and their drink orders taken, Greg smiled at Kate and said: "I suppose you're wondering what this is all about."

"Yes, I am. I've been wondering since your call."

He smiled sweetly, a little-boy smile, and Kate was almost ashamed to think that she had harbored any suspicions about Greg Hardy. "I don't blame you," he said. "I guess that was a little pushy of me, calling you like that and twisting your arm to go out with me. But there's a project I've been working on, something very special to me. And when I saw you, I said to myself, There she is, there's the woman who can help you. Kate Sherwood."

For no reason at all, she started to blush. It was as if he had paid her a very personal and very intimate compliment. She hadn't the slightest notion of what Greg's project might be, but she was pleased and flattered that this virtual stranger had picked her to help with it.

"I want to do a book," he continued, "using case material from my practice about women today . . . their needs, their fears and frustrations. Kind of a contemporary answer to Freud's question: what do women want?"

"Uh-huh."

"Does that *uh-huh* mean you don't think it sounds very interesting? Or maybe you think it's been done?"

"The second, maybe, I'm not sure."

"Let me show you the material," he coaxed, his eyes eager and hopeful. "I need a collaborator, a woman to help with the writing and the thinking. Are you interested?"

Yes, she thought, I certainly am. To the question at hand, she answered: "I don't know. Writing a book, that might be

too much of a giant step for me right now. What makes you think I can do it? And how did you happen to be watching the cable show? That's on in the middle of the day."

He smiled, looking very much like an angelic choirboy on a Christmas card. "That's one of the good parts of being a psychiatrist. There's always the odd hour in the middle of the day. I can either work or play hooky or watch television: talk shows . . . soap operas . . ."

"Really?" she smiled back. "Not many men would admit to that."

"I do," he said, pleased with himself. "And when you get to know me better, you'll see that I admit to a lot of things most men won't."

She liked Greg's use of the word *when*. It bespoke a certain confidence in himself, as well as an interest in getting to know her better. "Tell me why you think I'm the right person to help you with this book," she said, trying to sound equally poised and self-assured.

"Just a hunch, from things you said on the show and the way you look. So will you look at the material? Say yes," he coaxed, covering her hand with his, and she felt that *yes* was the only answer she wanted to give.

"When?"

"How about after dinner?"

"Tonight?" Once again, Greg had surprised her. This was certainly a man in a hurry.

"Please? I know this doesn't sound very professional, but now that I've found you, I'm anxious to get started."

"Okay," she said, then wondered exactly what she had agreed to when he took her other hand in his and squeezed it.

"Great! Now that we've got our business out of the way, tell me about you, Kate."

She flushed again. "There isn't that much to tell, really," she said. Yet by the time the waiter brought their coffee and desserts, she found that he had led her, with intelligent questions and encouraging smiles, into a relaxed and fairly candid thumbnail sketch of her life to date. He's good at this, she thought, as he was paying the check. He's easy to talk to.

As she sat curled up in a leather armchair in Greg's study, her shoes off, her feet tucked under her, Kate was very much aware of his presence just a few feet away. She tried to concentrate on the material on her lap, but she could sense that

he was watching her, studying her, in the intimacy of this softly lit room.

As her eyes tried unsuccessfully to cover the same paragraph for the third time, she looked up at him. "I think I'd better take this home. It's hard for me to concentrate right now."

"Really?" He gave the little-boy grin that was already beginning to do things to her pulse rate. "I'm flattered."

"I think I'd better be going." She started to put her shoes on. "I'll read this tomorrow, and then I'll get back to you."

"Stay." He put his arm out to stop her. "Have a nightcap with me. Let's talk awhile longer."

She sank back into the chair, noticing that he put a Vivaldi tape on the player before he poured two brandies.

"I want you to like this material," he said. "I want you to be enthusiastic about it."

"Why?"

"Because I think it can be an important piece of work if we do it right. I think it's the kind of book that could make for better understanding between men and women."

"Is that a special cause of yours?"

He looked intently at her, as if to determine whether or not she was taking him seriously. "Are you interviewing me?" he asked.

"A little. That's what you've been doing with me, isn't it?"

"A little."

"I guess that's what we should be doing. If this is going to be a real collaboration, we should know if we can have a meeting of the minds."

"And maybe a little more than that," he said suggestively.

She ignored the comment because it made her nervous. "I wish you'd tell me a little more about the project," she said, in her most professional manner.

"Okay," he said, parodying her attitude, a little smile playing around the corners of his mouth. "Whatever you say, Kate. Call this book my penance. I was married for a couple of years and I made a mess of it."

"Really?" She sat up, attentive and curious. She would have guessed that Greg was the kind of stuff of which happily-ever-afters might be made. "It usually takes two people to make a mess of a marriage, doesn't it?"

"No," he said firmly. "Not this time. Nancy, my wife, was a terrific woman. All she wanted was the chance to be herself. We talked about it before we were married. We lived together

for a year, and we seemed to be all right. But after we got married, I don't know what got into me. I knew I was behaving badly, that I was pushing her away, but I couldn't seem to stop. I resented everything she had that she didn't share with me. Her friends, her work, all the private time that she needed for herself. I resented the fact that her work was in a different field from mine. She was, is, a designer . . . children's clothes. And that she couldn't seem to take more than a mild interest in what I was doing. Later, after it was all over, it all seemed so pathetically stupid—all the ways I made the marriage impossible for her. But at the time, I couldn't seem to stop challenging her, making accusations, withdrawing from her when she tried to get close, even sexually. I . . ."

"Look," she interrupted, apprehensive that he was getting into areas he'd regret discussing with her. People always seemed to be telling her things, making her caretaker of their most personal thoughts. "You don't have to tell me all this. I think I understand what you're driving at. This is your second chance to do some things over, at least in your mind."

"Something like that." He smiled his appreciation of her understanding. "I suppose I have an even more romantic idea of what it's all about. In a way, it's like a love letter to Nancy . . . the understanding I couldn't give her when we were married."

Kate was touched. Greg was trying to create a kind of Taj Mahal monument to his wife. Then she felt something else—a small pang of annoyance. Why was it, she wondered, that eternal tributes to women came after they were "dead," safely sanctified in memory, unable to do anything sloppily human? "Do you still love her?" she asked impulsively and then regretted the question. Greg's emotional entanglements were none of her business.

"In a way," he said promptly, as if this were a question he had already asked himself. "I used to fantasize about different kinds of miracles, ways we could start over . . . love intact, but a little smarter . . ."

"But not anymore," she probed, fascinated now by the opportunity to peek at the workings of a man's mind. A man who was becoming more interesting, in more than a professional way, by the moment.

"Not anymore," he said. "I realized at some point that I was hanging onto the fantasy because I was afraid to start again with a real woman. So I started to let go, a little at a time . . ."

"It sounds so sad," she murmured.

"It is sad," he said earnestly, warning to his subject. "And it's all so crazy. Mating is such a basic human function. But our brains have become so complicated, while our emotions still function on some gut primitive level." He looked at her, trying to see if she was following him. "What I mean," he explained, "is that we're capable of love on levels our ancestors never dreamed of, but we never get there because we're driven by those old simplistic fears. Men and women as natural enemies, necessary evils. It creates the excitement at first, the fear that fascinates, you know? But it gets in the way of real, sustained intimacy. The more we're attracted to a person, the more we have a need to get rid of the fears. And we begin testing, acting out questions: Will you turn on me if I do this? Will you hurt me if I do that? We do this because we desperately need to know that it's safe, that it's all right to love. But most of the time relationships get grounded on those unspoken questions because we get the wrong answers. So love gets stunted and the fear is always with us. And every time it surfaces, the testing begins again, the wife-beating, the extramarital affairs, whatever. Does this make any sense to you?"

She nodded, thinking that she had just met a man who could teach her something, something that could make an important difference in her life. "I just never thought of relationships in such a complicated way," she said. "I've always seen things more simply. I don't know if I can be much help . . ."

"Hey," he smiled. "Don't let me scare you off. I'll get off the soapbox. You'll be fine. You seem like a reasonable woman with lots of common sense and no obvious prejudices. What I'd want from you is a counterpoint to my thinking. I want you to filter what I say through your own experience. I think we'd make a good team."

At this point, Kate was too flushed with brandy and the warmth of Greg's words to do anything but agree.

A week later, the cool light of Kate's "common sense" was making her see something in Greg's material, something that disturbed her. Although her lawyer had already begun drawing up a collaboration agreement, she felt that there were questions she had to ask. When she arrived at Greg's office for their first official working meeting, she said: "Look, before we really get started, I think I should tell you that there's an element in your notes that bothers me."

He looked surprised. "What is it?" he asked, more curious than concerned.

"I don't know how to put this," she faltered, "but the pages on your women patients . . . some of it sounds very scientific and well-reasoned . . . but there's something . . . I don't know what it is . . . an attitude, maybe . . ."

"Attitude?" he interrupted, his brow furrowing, his voice rising slightly. "Are you saying I have an unscientific attitude?"

She was surprised at his reaction. She had apparently struck a nerve without knowing why and how. She hesitated about saying anything more. After all, he was the expert here, and what did she know about the inner workings of the human mind? Then she saw him tense, waiting for an answer, and she knew she had to say something. "I just wondered," she said quietly, "if you realize how stereotyped your women sound."

"Stereotyped?" he repeated. "What do you mean by that?"

Reluctantly she went on. "I mean that these women don't sound like women I know. They seem like storybook women . . . different versions of the old madonna-whore theme . . ."

His face flushed red, and she could see the anger threatening to erupt. "Whore? Where have I made any woman a whore? Show me—where? I have the greatest respect for women. I care about them . . . I . . ."

"I believe you, Greg," she said soothingly, not knowing exactly why she had to do that. "Okay, maybe I used the wrong words, but when you use the medical words, you talk about women's destructive behavioral techniques, but always as they relate to men. And the madonna thing, you've refined it, but it's still there. You raise some women so high, you make them better than the men they're with. You make them into icons. They just sound so so pure and so unreal. You did ask me for a woman's point of view," she finished, a little defensively, "and I just wanted to tell you my first impressions, that's all."

His face went through a series of changes as she sat across from him in a state of increasing discomfort. Then he said coldly, "I see." A pause. Then: "Maybe this isn't going to work after all."

She sat there for a moment, not knowing what to say. She felt that she had very definitely been dismissed, not only as a collaborator, but also as a possible "something else." She gathered up her things and started for the door. "I'm sorry," she said, and then regretted that she'd apologized for having an opinion.

\* \* \*

The following morning, just as she was about to call her lawyer and tell him to forget about drawing up the collaboration papers, her telephone rang. When she answered, she heard Greg's voice, quiet, subdued.

"I hope you'll speak to me," he said.

"Why shouldn't I? We didn't really quarrel or anything. I don't even know you well enough to be angry."

"Have dinner with me? Tonight?"

"I—I don't know," she hesitated, pleased that he'd asked, but wary that this was a man full of complications and contradictions that she could not possibly begin to understand.

"Please. Don't say no. Just come to dinner with me and listen to what I have to say."

"All right, then."

"Pick you up at eight."

As she rummaged through her closet, Kate found that she was approaching this evening with Greg Hardy as if it were a date and not a business meeting. She checked and discarded the usual slacks and tailored outfits that made up her working uniform. Instead she chose a gold lamb's wool sweater-dress with a turtleneck and a narrow belt. The color picked up the new-found golden highlights in her hair, and the fabric softly outlined the contours of her body. She scented herself liberally with Chloé, and as she checked her appearance in the mirror, she looked exactly as she felt: very female, flushed in anticipation of Greg's arrival.

And when he did arrive, promptly at eight, Kate smiled to herself, because he, too, had dressed with care, in a dark gray suit and a white button-down shirt. He looked freshly shaved, and as she extended her hand in greeting, she caught a whiff of cologne.

She offered him a drink, and when he declined, she couldn't think of anything else to say. Their first few moments together were clumsy and awkward, as if there had been a lovers' quarrel that neither of them knew how to mend.

"Shall we go?" he said finally. "Our reservation's for eight-fifteen."

They walked in silence to a small but elegant Italian restaurant on West Third Street, where the maître d' greeted Greg by name. "The pasta is good here," Greg said to her, "and so is the fish."

Kate studied the menu and then looked up at Greg. "You order," she said. "Everything looks good."

"You don't have to do that," he said quietly. "I'm not that hard to get along with. Really."

She looked at the boyish face that seemed so sweet, and then she remembered how quickly that angelic expression could turn into anger. "You could've fooled me," she wisecracked.

He looked startled and then he laughed and the tension was broken.

"Okay," he said. "I owe you an apology. You did exactly what I'd asked you to do; you told me what you thought. I couldn't believe you were saying those things, that I was wrong after all that work. So I panicked and told myself you didn't know what you were talking about. It was stupid."

"Oh, I wouldn't say..."

"Don't be so understanding. Let me finish. I looked at the material again. You might be right. I might have been over-compensating for some of my personal failures, losing my professional balance in some of my interpretations. So I'm sorry... for not listening, which is supposed to be what I do for a living."

"It's nice of you to say that."

"It isn't. I'm being selfish. I want us to work together. We'd be good together, I know it." He covered her hands as he had the evening they met, and the gesture felt warming and natural. She would do Greg's book, though she didn't believe for a minute that anything about him was going to be easy.

## Chapter 29

THIS time it's going to work, Wendy promised herself. She had this really good feeling about it. Roger was different from all the rest. He hadn't actually lived with his wife for years. Having been burned so many times by men who were supposedly married in name only, she had taken the time and trouble to find out that Mrs. Roger Halloran and her three offspring did indeed reside in Scarsdale, New York. And so far as she could see, Mrs. Halloran did not seem to have a presence in Roger's Manhattan apartment.

What wasn't so great, so far as Wendy was concerned, was the fact that Roger never allowed her to spend more than one night in a row at his place and that not as often as she'd like. Occasionally she found traces of other female presences, but when she questioned Roger about them, he'd assured her that these bits and pieces represented no one special.

Being of a hopeful nature, she'd translated Roger's dating of other women as further evidence that he was a bona fide bachelor. He had never actually promised to marry her, but he assured her regularly that it was only a matter of time before his de facto divorce became a legal one. This she took to be a kind of commitment to her.

He did spend a lot of time at her apartment. He was thoughtful and considerate, and he never seemed to tire of telling her that she was a wonderful girl, a good sport, and very comfortable to be with. She took this to be very solid foundation for her dreams.

Tonight she expected to take another step closer to that dream, and she prepared carefully for the moment when Roger would arrive. She took a long, soaking bath in English lavender salts, loofahed her body religiously, pumiced her elbows and

heels, and when she was finished, liberally applied scented body moisturizer all over. Next she gave herself a honey-almond facial, followed by a careful plucking of all superfluous eyebrow hairs.

Before she made up her face and brushed her hair, she popped a bottle of Santa Sofia soave into the freezer. It was one of the best low-priced ones she had found in her search for gracious living at budget prices. When she had made herself as beautiful as she could be, she prepared her special dip of avocado, crabmeat and cream cheese. She loved to lavish the results of her limited homemaking skills on Roger, to give him a taste of what married life with her could be like.

Unlike some of the other girls she knew who dated married men, Wendy didn't care if she was taken out to fancy restaurants or gifted with expensive jewelry. She didn't measure a man's character by the money he spent on her. She looked for important things like courtesy and consideration. Genuine caring and mutual respect. These were part of Wendy's dream.

And in the years that the dream had eluded her, she had started to read self-help books as some women read romance novels. She fairly inhaled the information they offered, sucked it in, confident, or at least hopeful, that this new, latest formula for better, realer relationships, would bring her that much closer to a man of her own. And though she was inevitably disappointed, she did not give up, choosing to believe instead that she had not, either in her therapy or in her private explorations, hit on the right set of answers.

Tonight she felt certain that she and Roger would take a giant step toward a coupled condition. The day before, she had performed an early pregnancy test on herself. The results were positive, and she was eager to discuss this new development with Roger. She did not expect him to say: "Swell, I'll get a divorce right away, and we can get married." No, she thought it very likely that Roger might not want any more children, not with two in high school already, not with all those college bills ahead of him.

But she felt that the fact of the pregnancy was important. It would be the first real problem that they could deal with together, the first mutual decision that involved more than a choice of movie or what they would have for dinner. Dealing with the problem would certainly strengthen the sense of involvement.

As she waited for Roger, she hummed along, as she listened

to the strains of "Body and Soul" on the FM radio station that had so often provided the musical accompaniment to their evenings together. She started chopping vegetables for a salad and took a quiche from the freezer, leaving it on top of the range, ready to heat-and-eat.

When Roger arrived, he was carrying a large bunch of daisies, which she took to be a very auspicious beginning. He was in a good mood, expansive and loving. She kissed him hello and reached up to ruffle his thinning sandy hair, then pulled back, remembering that he didn't like anyone messing up the results of his careful combing.

"Come in," she invited, thinking how he sort of resembled Richard Harris. "Get comfortable and relax. I'll get you a drink." She loosened his tie, then led him to the sofa that doubled as a bed.

He stretched out full length and exhaled. "Long day," he said. "Feels good to unwind."

"Here," she said, handing him the vodka martini, just the way she knew he liked it. "This will help."

"Thanks. You look nice. You should always wear that color blue. Makes your eyes stand out."

She smiled her appreciation of the compliment and sat on the floor next to him, massaging his neck and shoulders to ease away the day's tensions.

"Umm," he murmured, "you're a lifesaver. Just what I needed."

"I'm glad," she said, thrilled with the words. "I feel the same way."

He closed his eyes as she continued to minister to his cramped muscles. When she was finished, he leaned back into the sofa. She took the drink from his fingers and put it down on the coffee table.

"Roger," she said softly.

"Yeah?"

"There's something I think we should discuss."

"What's that?"

"I seem to be pregnant."

He opened his eyes and sat up very carefully and deliberately. "And?"

"And I thought we should talk about it."

"Okay. What is it you want from me?"

She hadn't quite expected this kind of response. Something in his tone and the set of his body made her new and fragile

sense of security waver even more. "Well," she said tentatively, "I'd hoped we could work this out together."

"No." The word was flat, unequivocal.

"No?" she echoed.

"It's your body. It's your decision," he said in that same dead-set voice. "If you want to have an abortion, I'll pay for it. If you want to have a baby, I'll pick up whatever bills your insurance doesn't cover. After that, it's up to you."

Wendy stared. This was not the way this discussion was supposed to go. She shook her head, bewildered at the total separation that had just taken place. "But I thought..."

"Don't," he commanded, with icy control. "I don't know what you thought. And I really don't want to hear. That number has been done. By experts. Let's just skip all the tears and recriminations and get to the bottom line. You're a nice kid. I like you. We've had some good times. You don't owe me, and I don't owe you. Now we have this situation. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and say it's an accident, that you didn't do it on purpose..."

"I didn't," she pleaded, horrified at what he was saying. "I wouldn't do such a thing. Roger, I swear, I'd never..."

"Okay, okay," he said, his voice a little softer. "So we'll just settle this nicely, like friends. You'll decide, you'll let me know, and I'll do what I can."

"I just..." she started again, tears spilling freely now on the blue dress he'd admired a few minutes ago. And she found she could not say what she'd hoped for, that if they decided on an abortion, he would see her through the experience, hold her and comfort her. Like a real lover would. She found that she could not say this, not to a man who was acting as if she'd committed some awful crime against him.

In her head she heard an echo. "Are you sure?" The words that Dr. Hatfield had said to her so often, after Wendy would describe the times she'd spend with Roger. "Are you sure that's what this relationship is all about? Or is this what you want it to be?"

Now she wasn't sure at all. What she did know was that Roger wasn't going to do any of those things she'd imagined. And the fear took hold of her again. The fear that she'd done it again. That somehow she'd made one of those awful mistakes she couldn't seem to stop making. That she was going to feel so very all alone and so very, very bad.

"Listen," Roger said, getting up from the couch. "I'll get

going now. You get some rest. I'll call you in a couple of days to see what you've decided."

"But dinner . . ." she protested.

"I'm not hungry."

She trailed him to the door, trying desperately to think of some way she could salvage the situation. "Roger," she said, holding his arm to detain him a moment longer. "I'll get an abortion. Right away. Honest. I'll pay for it myself. Okay?"

"Whatever you like," he answered, in a tone that said "going, going, gone."

"Roger, please, don't be like this. I love you."

"Look," he said, all impatience now. "Wendy, love has nothing to do with this. We had some nice times, like I just told you. I felt relaxed with you. That's changed now. If I was to jump in the sack with you again, I'd be wondering what kind of net you were going to throw over me next. You can see that wouldn't be much good for either of us."

"I wouldn't," she protested. "I wouldn't."

"Wendy, kid, do yourself a favor. If you're thinking babies, get yourself a nice single guy and settle down with him."

And then he was gone. She stared at the door and wondered stupidly why none of the men she'd known said that until they were finished with her.

"I was pregnant last week," she said to the group in a voice heavy with weariness. "And now I'm not. It's over with Roger and me."

"Oh, you poor thing," Ellen reached over and squeezed Wendy's arm. "I'm so sorry."

"I did it again," she went on, as if she did not hear the words or feel the touch. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong, but I just keep on doing it."

"You haven't been doing anything so wrong," Kate said, and her words surprised her. "You've just been choosing the wrong people to do it with."

"She's right, dear," Janine chimed in. "You're a lovely girl, but the men you go out with—my mother would have called them rotters. They can only make you unhappy, no matter what you do. If you want to get married, you should find a nice man with good intentions. Why, look what's happened to me since I met Henry, the man I told you all about. He's met my children and I've met his. We're honest with each other, and we talk about our future. If it can happen to me, dear, it can happen

to you. Look at me, Wendy. I'm not as young or as pretty or as clever as you are. You have all the time in the world to find someone who deserves you."

Wendy smiled, thinking bitterly that Janine was saying the same kind of things that Roger had said. The same things everyone had told her at one time or another. Find a nice guy. Sure. As if she hadn't tried. As if she wouldn't give her soul for a real home and a family of her own. "Yeah," she said, because they all seemed to be waiting for her to say something. "Yeah, I guess that's what I'll just have to do."

A small silence followed, and when it was clear that Wendy had retreated into herself, Ellen spoke. "I thought I was pregnant a couple of months back," she said. A small collective groan greeted her announcement. "Well, I wasn't," she went on, "but when it happened, I realized I didn't know who the father might be. This was, as they say, one of my more sexually active periods. I would have had an abortion, of course," she said matter-of-factly. "But I thought to myself that if I wanted a baby, that wasn't a bad way to do it."

"Why did you think that?" Dr. Hatfield asked gently.

Clearly Ellen had given this some thought. "Because we all make such a big deal about our right to decide whether to get an abortion. But when we do decide to have a baby, we expect miracles from the men we're with, and most of them just aren't prepared for that."

"What are you saying?" Kate asked. "That we should start out by expecting nothing at all from the men we're with? Isn't that carrying independence too far? If we start off saying men aren't capable of much, isn't that a total put-down?"

Ellen thought for a minute. "I don't think so. I think I like men more than the rest of you do, in spite of my bitching and complaining. I honestly like them. I start out with a more accepting attitude because I'm used to taking care of myself and the people I care about. I've never looked to a man to be a meal ticket or a hero or any of those fantasy roles the rest of you assign. I can see that they have a hard time getting along, and I don't despise them for it. I can enjoy what they have to offer, the companionship, the sex, the fun—and I don't have to make trades. If they want to do something for me, fine, and if they don't, that's fine, too."

There was a brief pause after Ellen's speech, as everyone tried to digest what she had said. Finally Kate asked: "Is it fine, Ellen? Is it really fine? If it is, then you must be a saint."

And I don't think that's what love between two people is all about."

Ellen shook her head, but she had no ready response.

Margo spoke, in a voice that seemed incongruously cool and detached. "I don't know why you all keep manufacturing complications here. No matter what kind of romantic nonsense you wrap around a relationship, it is a contract, with terms and clauses. It would be much easier if we spelled them all out, on paper. But we go around pretending they don't exist. We try to second-guess our men, and we feel wounded if we're not properly second-guessed. I think the Europeans have a good formula. They marry in one frame of reference, and they take lovers in another. It's realistic and it's practical. Romance in one place, family stability in another."

Kate shot her friend an "Oh, really?" look, but said nothing. She felt there would be something disloyal about exposing Margo's inconsistencies in anything more public than a tête-à-tête. But she couldn't quite sit still for everything that had been said, so she ventured gently: "You're talking about the compartmentalization that women here don't do very well, Margo. It sounds practical but I don't know how realistic it is." She was tempted to ask: "And what about your life. It doesn't always work for you." But she didn't.

Suddenly the therapist turned to Rose, who was sitting very still, huddled in her chair, her eyes brimming with tears. "Rose?" Myra said gently. "You've been very quiet tonight. Is something wrong?"

Rose nodded, trying to compose herself. She gulped some air and started to speak. "I don't want to cry. I hate to cry . . . even when I was in school, I hated it." Nervously she smoothed her dark skirt over her knees and adjusted the collar on her white blouse, and for a moment, it was possible to glimpse the little girl who had gone to parochial schools for thirteen years, who had attended Mass almost every Sunday of her life. "John just told me he was moving out if we didn't put Joey in a special school. I said, 'If you want to go, then go.'"

"Oh, no," Kate whispered.

"I knew it was going to happen," Rose said sadly. "I prayed John would change his mind, but it only got worse . . ."

"Wasn't there anything?" Kate questioned. "Any compromise? Couldn't you find a way to spend more time with John, just the two of you? Maybe . . ."

Rose shook her head. "I tried, Kate, every way I know how.

But every day something comes up and I have to choose between John and Joey. It wears me out. It isn't fair, but I don't know how to change it. Joey's the only one who can't fight for what he wants. He just holds my hand and says 'Please, Mommy.' Sometimes I get so mad at John for putting me in the middle like that. So when he puts it to me again: 'Rose, make up your mind—Joey or the marriage,' I picked Joey."

"And how did John react to that?" Myra asked.

"It was funny . . . he said something like 'I knew it.' He sounded kind of bitter and glad at the same time."

"Do you think it's possible," Myra suggested, "that John got to the point where he just needed to withdraw from all the problems you've lived with for so long? That he needed you to help him do it?"

Rose considered Myra's idea. "I don't know . . . maybe. He did quiet down a little bit, after he said he was going. He said he would always take care of us, Joey and me."

"And how do you feel about that?" Myra asked.

"It hurts. And I'm scared. But I can live with it. I know I couldn't live with Joey on my conscience, so this is the only way. I figure, let John see what it's like without us. If he's happier that way, good luck to him. If he misses us . . . we'll see."

"Maybe this is a good place to stop," Myra said.

There was a small grumble of dissatisfaction. "Something wrong?" the therapist asked.

"I guess we're thinking," Kate said, "that for all the talking we do here about changing things, the day-to-day stuff doesn't get any easier."

"Okay," Dr. Hatfield nodded. "Let me just respond to that. We all want better, but that may not be easier. Let's say we'd all like to reach for the sky, but we have to spend most of our days earthbound, planting rice. We still need the other—a sense of where we'd like to be. Does that make sense?" She looked around at the assembled faces. "No? You're not satisfied? Sorry, folks, it's the best I can do right now. See you all next week."

The women clustered together as they left the room, laughing and talking. Only Wendy remained, slumped in her chair, in an attitude of abject weariness.

"Wendy?" Myra Hatfield said gently. "Would you like to talk here for a few minutes? Or maybe you'd like an extra session this week?"

Wendy shook her head, as if everything was just too much effort. "It wouldn't make any difference. It's always the same garbage, that's all I seem to know how to do."

"Wendy, listen to me. You're depressed now. You have every right to be. You've had a bad time. A broken relationship, an aborted pregnancy—those are painful, difficult things to deal with under the best of circumstances. What you're feeling is normal and understandable. You'll get through it, and then you'll see how many options are open to you. When the depression lifts, when you're thinking more clearly, we can talk about some brand new beginnings."

"If you say so," Wendy said listlessly.

"I really don't like to leave you like this. Call me in the morning and make an appointment. Will you do that?"

"I'll see. I'd better go now. See you."

Wendy woke up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She got up from the sofa bed and folded it with quick practiced movements into its daytime position.

She walked into the bathroom and stepped on the scale. The needle pointed to one hundred twelve, up a pound from the day before. It was the take-out Mexican meal she'd had last night. Cottage cheese and fruit today, she thought automatically, then changed her mind. What the hell was the difference. Nobody cared how she looked.

She put a kettle of water on for instant coffee, then returned to the bathroom for a quick shower. She lathered up and let the warm water splash over her body. She slid her hands down her body as she rinsed, and the touch of her fingers triggered the constant ache she'd felt since that last awful night with Roger.

She had tried to keep busy, working long hours at the office, going to movies, watching television. But each day she spent without a man made her feel like less of a woman, less alive, less everything good. She couldn't say any of this to the women in the group. They would all think she was awful.

Out of habit she had smiled when the new man from Accounting had stopped at her desk yesterday. She laughed when he made a few jokes about one of the office eccentrics. Almost automatically she had assumed a receptive, wide-eyed posture when he segued into some personal remarks about how he couldn't help but notice her. And then she had spotted the wedding ring. It had stopped her cold.

Experience had taught her that the most dangerous philanderers were the ones who wore their wedding rings, who were all outraged innocence when a woman tried to hold them to any pillow promises they had made. "You knew I was married going in," was their standard line of defense against reminders of their own dishonesty. And so she had cut the man off when he invited her for a drink after work. She'd pigged out instead on Mexican food, consuming it joylessly in front of her television set, eyes glazing over from the effort of watching one sit-com after another.

All evening the misery wouldn't leave her. That brief encounter had been the only prospect she'd had in weeks. Another married man. Another set of cheap hellos and awful good-byes, with a lot of false hopes and disillusionments in between.

But the loneliness, the awful aloneness she was feeling now—that was hard, too. She tried not to think about it as she towed off and went into the kitchen to fix the coffee and single slice of toast that constituted her usual breakfast.

She arrived at her desk to find a note from her boss. She buzzed his secretary, announced her arrival and walked into his office, wondering what she might have done to warrant his attention.

"Come in, Wendy," he invited. "I like the work you did on the Fidelity Trust campaign. I liked your ideas, and I liked the effort you obviously put into executing them."

"Thank you," she said, pleased that she'd been singled out and puzzled by Warren Carter's sudden turnabout. The Westchester Wasp, as her boss was known around the office, was not an easy man to please, not secure enough to acknowledge the contributions of others or to dispense compliments.

"I'm flying out to Cleveland to meet with the client on Wednesday. I want you to come with me. If everything goes well, then there's a good chance we'll be moving you up."

She could hardly believe what he was saying. "Thank you, Mr. Carter. Thanks for the confidence."

He smiled, and she realized that she had never seen him smile in her direction. "I hope you appreciate how much that confidence means, Wendy. Especially with the economic pressure we've been under this year. We've had to do some cutting back, reluctantly, I grant you, but I'm afraid that we'll be doing even more," he said, getting up from behind the desk and taking a face-to-face posture with her. "I'm offering you an oppor-

tunity to move into, shall we say, a less dispensable position in this firm." He squeezed her wrist, then ran his fingers up her arm, with a proprietary ease that made her flesh crawl. Wendy had been propositioned often enough to know the signals.

"Mr. Carter," she said, moving back out of his reach. "I think I should say something now. I want this opportunity, but it has to be because you think my work is good. Not for any personal reasons."

"Oh, come off it, Wendy," he said, smiling again. "Who are you trying to kid? I've done my homework on you. Your work's adequate enough, but what interests me is that you seem to be a girl who knows how to be discreet. And if I've made a mistake about that," he said pleasantly, "why, then, it would seem that you won't be nearly as valuable to me as I'd imagined. Not at all."

"Are you threatening to fire me if I don't sleep with you?" she asked bluntly, misery making her more reckless than she might have been otherwise.

He chuckled, still in command of the situation. "I like your candor, Wendy, and, yes, there's a definite possibility that your job security is at stake here."

"But you can't," she said, misery giving way to anger. "You can't do that. It's against the law. I could take legal action."

He chuckled again, unruffled by what she had said. "Wendy, dear, you must do what you like, of course. But I think you should know that sexual harassment—I assume that's what you have in mind—I think you should know you'd have a hard time making a case for that kind of charge. Not when you've had, shall we say, a checkered past. Your work record hasn't exactly been distinguished. There's nothing on your performance ratings that would make you so outstanding as to be indispensable. Rest assured that if I choose to fire you, there really won't be much you can do about it. Make a little noise perhaps. But it won't get you your job back. And it will make other firms take a long, hard look at you. Especially when they find you won't have any references. Because you won't get any from me." He moved forward and squeezed her arm again. "Go on back to your desk and think about Cleveland," he said. "If you make the right decision, I won't hold this little outburst against you."

Somehow she left the office, went back to her desk, collected her purse and told the receptionist she was ill. Robotlike,

she found a taxi and fled back to the apartment she'd left just a short time before.

She turned the key in the lock and opened the door, and suddenly it was as if she were seeing her studio apartment with the eyes of a stranger. It didn't seem like much—the modest furnishings, the bits and pieces from Azuma and Conran's and The Pottery Barn. Her home, her refuge, suddenly seemed makeshift and cut-rate and lacking in substance. There was nothing to distinguish it from the apartments of a thousand women like her, struggling to make ends meet and pretending it was all great, in a city that seemed to offer glamour and excitement and gave instead broken dreams and disappointment. Even the plants, which she'd added one by one to give color and life to the place, looked disconsolate, as if they would be happier elsewhere.

She went to the kitchen to get a cold drink. Surveying the contents of her refrigerator, she found a large, open, and probably flat bottle of Perrier, a cut and moldering lime, two small yogurts, some Brie that had long since turned to rubber, a lone can of diet soda and a jar, a small jar, of instant coffee. It was a bleak city still life, one that brought a fresh rush of desolation, one that made her forget her thirst and made her feel heavy and tired.

She didn't have the strength to reopen her couch, so she just crumpled into the cushions. She closed her eyes, she didn't know for how long, and when she opened them, the first thing she noticed was the alarm clock, which had roused her for work every day and which had been used, for more times than she wanted to remember, to rouse her lovers from their heavy, post-coital slumbers, to remind them that they had homes and families to return to. She closed her eyes again and sank back into a semi-sleep, until she heard the ring of her telephone. She did not reach for it. There was no one she wanted to talk to.

If I could only sleep for a week, she thought, but her brain refused to shut down. Images flashed across her mind, of the scene she had just played at the office, of the worst moments she had experienced, with all the men who had passed through her life like so much traffic. It was all like a bad movie, subtitled with a remark that Rose Mancini had made in group: "You don't respect yourself, Wendy, and if you don't, no man is going to." It was like a life sentence, more than a diagnosis, she thought.

She was barely thirty, she reminded herself. Plenty of time to straighten herself out. Dr. Hatfield had told her that, more than once. So had the women in the group. But how? She felt so tired, so used up. It all seemed so hard. Finding work, finding someone to take the edge off the crushing loneliness, something to make you believe that a new day was worth waking up for.

She picked up the phone and dialed Myra Hatfield's number.

"... so I thought you had all best hear the news from me," Myra Hatfield was saying. "The police called me late last night. My name was on the pad near her telephone, so they thought I might know something about the—the next of kin. They also asked whether I thought she might have fallen from the window accidentally or whether she did it... deliberately."

"Mother of God," Rose murmured.

"Poor child," Janine whispered.

Then there was silence.

"I know you must all be feeling something about this," Dr. Hatfield said. "I think it would help if we talked about it."

"It's a little late for talking," Ellen said heavily. "At least for Wendy. I feel like we all let her down."

"Is that what you think happened, Ellen?" Dr. Hatfield asked gently.

"Okay, we did worse than let her down. We dumped on her. We told her she was a rotten person. Then we told her she wasn't rotten, only stupid. She must have believed us."

"Do the rest of you feel this way?" the therapist asked.

"I didn't realize she was that fragile," Kate said. "I never imagined that anything we said or did would make such a big difference. Not life and death."

"Surely you're not suggesting that what happened here pushed Wendy out that window?"

"I guess I'm asking you that. Did it? Could we have done anything to help her?"

"You know I can't discuss anything that went on in our private sessions. But I can tell you this: I suggested that Wendy join this group because I felt she could gain a new perspective on her problems if she got to know other women. I still believe, given time, that would have happened. I think Wendy could have turned her life around. Since I got the news I've been searching my memory for clues I might have missed, something that might have told me she was ready to give up. That doesn't

mean that any of us did anything bad or wrong. We could have been more empathetic, less judgmental, more accepting, more caring—there's always room for growth in that direction. But whether any of that might have made a difference, I can't say. I can tell you that on the day she died, Wendy called me. It seems she had been sexually harassed by her employer, with the threat that she'd lose her job if she didn't comply. I tried to reassure her that we could work that through, that I would help her fight back. I thought she heard me. I regret that I didn't understand how desperate she was. I called her back later, to see how she was feeling. There was no answer. Shortly after that, the police called me."

"Oh, God," Ellen said, "such a victim, all the way down the line."

"But wasn't she the one who let it happen?" Margo asked. "I'm not criticizing her, please understand that. But when people exploit you or take advantage, don't you have to let it happen? Maybe you do it out of fear or something else, but you allow it."

"Is that what you do, Margo?" Ellen asked, annoyed and angry that Wendy's weaknesses were still being aired, even after they had defeated her. "Is that why you let your husband have his affairs, even though you didn't like it, not one little bit?"

A look of astonishment crossed Margo's face. She had never thought of herself as a victim in any of her relationships with men. She had always felt protected by her beauty, her charm. "No," she said defensively. "I've told you all before. Mario and I have more of a—a contractual thing. He does what he wants, but he gives me a great many reasons to overlook what I don't like."

"So what you're saying," Ellen persisted, "is that you're smarter than Wendy was. Because you got a good payoff—and she never got any."

"No! I never meant . . ." She stopped and thought about what Ellen had just said. She had always felt superior to Wendy. She had felt that Wendy was stupid to waste herself, to get into situations where she served a man, comforted him, met his needs and got very little in return. She had felt fortunate, wiser, to have made a better bargain of her life.

Sensing that she had made a direct hit, Ellen went on. "Look, all I'm saying is that none of us has any right to feel holier-than-thou about anyone else. We all make lousy deals.

We have no right to be smug when some poor soul goes down like a sinking ship." She looked at the therapist, as if for confirmation.

Dr. Hatfield nodded. "I can't take exception with that, Ellen. Maybe we should break early tonight. And if any of you wants to talk to me about this, please feel free to call."

## Chapter 30

"I LIKE movies," Greg said dreamily, as he and Kate returned to his apartment for a late drink. They had been working alternately at his apartment, then at hers. When it was his turn to host, Greg usually suggested a post-work treat. Tonight they had gone to a neighborhood movie. "Have you noticed," he mused, "how things always work in the movies? Even when things go wrong, they go wrong with style and panache."

Kate laughed, relaxed and easy with him, feeling in his presence a familiarity. "You're full of surprises, Dr. Hardy. You're such a romantic, and yet you spend your days trying to solve real-life problems." She took two glasses from the small bar he kept in the study and poured two brandies, thinking how natural it had become to make herself at home among Greg's things, particularly in this room where they spent so many hours together.

"Makes sense to me," he said, laying a fire in the fireplace, though it was a balmy spring night. Kate had once told him how much she missed the fireplace in her old apartment, and he had made a point of having a fire whenever she was at his place. "I hear so much anger and pain and confusion all day long. Missed opportunities. Messed-up relationships. Screenwriters seem to fix those things better than I do."

As she watched him kneeling there, in front of the fireplace, a little ruffled, serious and intent on arranging the logs and newspapers so they would burn nicely for an hour or so, she had the urge to ruffle his hair. She had been fighting urges like that for weeks now, almost from the beginning. She and Greg Hardy had a good working relationship, and the book was going very well. But she felt that if she crossed certain boundaries, something bad might happen to the relationship and to this

project that might take her a giant step forward in her career. She suspected that Greg might have similar reservations, for although he often made personal, even seductive remarks, his behavior, with occasional small slips, was almost brotherly.

"So," she said lightly, handing him his brandy and taking a place next to him in front of the fire, "you like movies with happy endings."

"I don't go to any other kind."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. I can get depressed without leaving my office. When I leave it, I need a little relief and a little hope. Even if it's the product of someone's imagination."

"That still sounds like you're a romantic at heart."

He grinned, a small boy caught with a secret. "Guilty. But don't tell anyone. It's not good for my image."

"I won't tell," she whispered. "Your secret's safe with me."

"I'm sure it is," he whispered back, sliding his hand over hers. "I believe you're a woman I can trust."

She started to smile at the compliment, and then she remembered another time, another man. Harry's "You're different from other women, Kate." At that moment, even as she noted the softness of Greg's eyes, the straight line of his nose, the sweetness of his smile, she had not the slightest doubt that there was much more to him than she had already seen and that it would cost her to find out any more.

"What about you?" she asked. "Can you be trusted?"

He looked startled. "I like to think so," he said. "I try."

His answer pleased her. She sat there, not moving, staring into the fire. They were both quiet, and when she finally turned to look at him again, she saw something new in his eyes, just before he took her face in his hands and kissed her.

Her own eyes, which were still closed when he released her, flew open. "Well," she said, reaching for a little lightness to cover her uncertainties, but Greg said nothing. He held her shoulders and gently pushed her away, creating a small space that seemed to grow by the moment. He looked into her eyes, silent, thoughtful. She leaned toward him, wanting to feel his mouth against hers again, to feed the warmth that had just begun to envelop them. But he shifted again. "Come on," he said, patting her cheek. "We'd better get you into a cab. Lots to do tomorrow."

And as she waved good-bye to him, she knew that the

question that had been building for weeks had surfaced this evening and that Greg had answered it all by himself.

In the cozy clutter of her own kitchen, Kate fixed herself a weak cup of tea. Sleep was out of the question; she was still too keyed up from those last moments with Greg.

Working with him and being with him stimulated Kate, heightened her awareness as nothing else had. Working with his thoughts and ideas made her feel as if she knew him in a personal and almost intimate way, made her curious and eager to know more. For Kate, the relationship with Greg had become part of her self-discovery, part of the changes in the way she thought and felt and behaved.

But if there were new pleasures in the relationship, there were also new insecurities. It had been a great many years since a man had been truly, vitally important to her. A lot had changed in those years that she'd been with Harry, and there were times when she didn't quite know how to relate to Greg, moments when she didn't know what kind of behavior would be appropriate for the new Kate in this new situation with a new man. She had grown up at a time when all the male-female clichés of the fifties had been declared obsolete, when new freedoms, new clichés of all kinds were being born. Yet she and Harry had failed to break any new ground or to invent anything new and original in their marriage. Now here she was, years later, not really sure of what was what.

To cover her insecurities, she had learned to wisecrack, Ellen-style, to defuse emotionally loaded situations, to protect herself from anything that felt uncomfortable or dangerous. Every so often, Greg would say sharply: "Stop that, Kate, you don't have to tap-dance around me." Yet the longer she knew him, the more attracted she was, the more she felt a need for the occasional smokescreen, the survival strategy. And for all Greg's talk of honesty and the desirability of being up front, Kate could see that he, too, sent out some very mixed signals. He could be forthright, sometimes blunt, but he could also be guarded, withdrawn and puzzling in his behavior.

Tonight he had assigned her a new role to play: a woman who could be trusted. He had kissed her. She had felt something very real in that kiss, and then he had backed away without a word of explanation. She knew that if she took any steps closer, she would be opening a Pandora's box of surprises. Promising

beginnings, chemistry that worked, those only took you so far. Later, when the weaknesses and vulnerabilities, all the emotional baggage from the past turned up like unwelcome relations to hang around until you dealt with them—that was when you knew if a relationship had the strength to survive. If she and Greg became lovers, she knew she would begin, one way or another, to find out all about the women in his past. And she would have to live down all their sins before she could even begin to commit her own. That was what a man expected when he said he trusted you.

“What’s with that guy Mom’s always with?” She heard Josh quiz Sarah the following morning. “Is he her boss or her boyfriend?”

“He’s a shrink,” Sarah explained with that throwaway sophistication she was beginning to assume, a stance that amused and sometimes intimidated Kate. “He’s not her boss exactly. I don’t think he’s her boyfriend, but I think she likes him. Sometimes she gets real sappy when she talks to him.”

“Do you like him?” Josh persisted.

“Oh, he’s all right, I suppose,” Sarah answered, all condescending airiness.

“If he gets to be Mom’s boyfriend, does he get to boss us around like Laurie does?”

Kate was surprised. She had not heard anything about Laurie bossing the children. She supposed they had held the information back out of loyalty to Harry, and she respected them for not complaining.

“I don’t know,” Sarah said. “It depends.”

“On what?”

“If Mommy tells him it’s okay to do it.”

“Oh, Sarah . . .”

“What?”

“I don’t get it.”

There was a pause.

“Neither do I.”

Margo bent over the blender, dipped her finger into the avocado facial she had put together, testing it for consistency. She was so intent on what she was doing that she failed to notice that she wasn’t alone. She jumped when she heard her husband’s voice.

"What is this?" he asked. "A domestic revival? I don't believe I've seen any activity of this sort for a very long time. Ah, it's avocado dip. Let me taste."

"No, no, it's not to eat. This is a facial I'm experimenting with."

"Really, Margo, homemade beauty preparations? Are you trying to tell me your allowance hasn't kept up with the current inflation rate?"

"No, this is for our 'Beauty on a Budget' department. And so are these." She waved her arm in the direction of scattered bowls of organic concoctions, mixtures made from egg whites, yogurt, lemon, oatmeal and other food products.

"Ah, I see, you're really serious about all this business, then?"

"Did you doubt it?"

He looked at her, apparently hearing the challenge in the question. "Perhaps I did," he said. "Perhaps I thought that after the novelty of it wore off, you'd grow tired of playing career woman."

"Then you don't think much of me, do you?"

"That's not what I meant at all. *Much* is a quantitative term. If I didn't think *much* of you, I wouldn't have married you. No, I meant that this—this zeal for paid labor doesn't seem quite congruous with certain ideas I had when we married. I had the distinct impression, Margo, that you were more than happy to give up toiling for your daily bread."

"You weren't wrong, Mario, you seldom are. But situations change, people change. Why should you think your wife would remain exactly the same, for the rest of her days? Surely you look for change and growth in your business?"

"That's true," he said quietly, "but if I were looking for change and growth, I would have married a teenager. And since you've chosen to employ a business analogy, then you must also know there can be negative repercussions to growth and change."

"That sounds like a threat."

"Merely a description of life as it is. If you find it threatening, then perhaps all this so-called change and growth is something else."

"What?"

"You have considered, haven't you, that this change is being accomplished substantially at my expense? That I am being deprived of something, without recompense, while you are still

enjoying the full benefits of our marriage?"

Margo remembered the conversation she'd had with Kate. She had no answer for her husband, certainly nothing to say that wouldn't provoke his anger.

She watched his retreating back. He would probably closet himself in his study with a Campari and soda and *The Wall Street Journal*, until she brought him something to nibble on before dinner. She mused on how nothing actually turned out the way you'd imagined it would be.

She had loved Mario once with passion. She had been impressed, yes, captivated by what he had and what he could give her. Yet there had been a powerful chemistry between them. Something had happened to it, something that had to do with him.

He had changed, in subtle but important ways. He had always been poised, self-controlled—and she would often tease him about "Prussians in the woodpile." She told him that she had always imagined Italians to be volatile, passionate and warm. He had smiled, amused by her teasing, as he had once been amused by so much she said and did. The same things that now made him frown with annoyance. Her sense of fun and whimsy, her blithe ignorance of so much that he considered important, the mercury of her mind that ran happy and sad all at once, that made her able to argue any side of a point without knowing much about either. "Consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds," she had said once, in her own defense. He had frowned, unamused.

She didn't know when he had stopped being a lover and started being a critic. But this shift had made her change too. Like an employee anxious to create some job security, she had tried to please. The spontaneity, the fun had gone out of it, but she had done her work well. Until recently, she thought grimly.

She hadn't realized how much the loss had meant, until she started listening to the women in the group. She realized that there was some value even in the pain they experienced, and she heard in their stories a certain intensity, an involvement that was missing in her life.

She had started thinking about her son, wondering what effect all this restraint, this "civilized" atmosphere was having on him. She couldn't see any sign of abnormality. Not yet. He was a very handsome boy, well-proportioned, tall for his age. He was a good student, a fine athlete, but whether from his

own inclination or from Mario's insistence, she wasn't sure.

Ever since Christopher had been very young, Mario had set him on skis and expected him to excel. He had taught the boy to play tennis and soccer. Now these games and the competitiveness that went with them were second nature with Christopher.

Once she asked him if he really enjoyed them. She saw the set of his jaw, so much like his father's. "Of course, Mother," he said. "Why wouldn't I?" She had no answer for that. He seemed well-adjusted, whatever that meant. Yet he seemed to patronize her, to take the same superior tone he'd heard Mario use so often. He had been an affectionate, loving child. Yet now there wasn't a great deal of spontaneity in his displays of love. He was, she thought wryly, a very civilized child.

Kate and Greg sat, working together amid the companionable disorder of his study. For the past several months, the chapters had been accumulating at a steady pace.

But since that spring evening when he had kissed her, something had changed in the chemistry of their time together. Greg was pleasant but all business. He had stopped making teasing, suggestive remarks. He treated her with respect as a collaborator, but not as a man treats a woman in whom he has more than a professional interest. It was as if he had peeked inside an open door and then closed it.

She found that she missed the possibility of something more. His withdrawal acted on her like an aphrodisiac. She found herself making excuses to brush against him, to let her fingers linger when they touched his, over a page of manuscript or a mug of coffee. Her heart leaped when he laughed or made a joke that included her, and she felt she had never wanted a man so much, not even Harry. She began to put herself to sleep with fantasies of Greg. She brought him to bed with her every night, and just before dreaming, she twined her fingers through his curls, kissed him until she was breathless, circled his body with hers, feeding the hunger that had become her daily companion.

She became a perfectionist with the work—Greg probably would have called it sublimation, had he known how she was feeling—trying to reach him with her skills and the working of her mind, since he didn't seem inclined to sample anything else. And she started to worry about what would happen when

the book was finished, when there would be no more need for them to spend long hours together.

Often she regretted the efficiency of the system they had evolved for pooling their efforts, wishing that she could delay the end of the project. Greg had grouped his case studies into chapters and handed them over to her for comments and notes. Then she made rough drafts, incorporating their joint observations and conclusions. After a second reading, Kate prepared clean drafts.

The more Kate read of Greg's work, the more time she spent with him, the more she wanted to keep him in her life. There was a caring quality, a sensitivity about him that she hadn't known before. True, he was a man with problems like everyone else, but he hadn't given up on trying to be better. When he made mistakes, he tried again. She found that quality so likable, so reassuring. It was different from the new sensitivity that was gaining popularity with so many men these days, which seemed to be the old macho turned inside out. "Look at my muscles" had mutated into "See how sensitive I am." She suspected that men who really had it didn't advertise so heavily.

In Greg she thought she saw the real thing, and it attracted her enormously. She had changed in what she found desirable in a man. She suspected that if she met Harry for the first time today, neither her eyes nor her interest would linger long. Harry was still good-looking. In fact, she thought with a little touch of malice, he seemed to be trying even harder in that department, probably to keep up with his glamorous new lady.

She looked up from the pages in front of her and caught Greg looking at her. He started to say something and then the doorbell rang.

"Must be the Chinese food," he said.

"Not a minute too soon. I'm starving."

Greg went to the door and returned with a cluster of cartons in his arms. "Okay," he said. "Let's grab some silverware and dishes and dig in."

"Not like that," she protested. "I don't want the taste of cardboard with my lemon chicken. Let's do this right." She led him into the kitchen and foraged around in the well-ordered cupboards. "Here," she said, picking out some ceramic bowls, "these look right. You have some nice things."

"Think so? It's always felt kind of cold and impersonal here

since Nancy left. I told her to take what she wanted. Then I just made a list of what was missing. I went shopping one day and bought it all. At the time I was too wiped out to notice what anything looked like."

"Still," she insisted, "the things you chose are nice."

"I'm glad you think so," he said, helping her spoon the food into dishes. "But I always feel it shows. I feel that every time I'm in here alone. It's different from your place, Kate. I know you haven't had much money to play with, but there's a heart to your home. I like it when we work there, and I always take something away with me."

Kate was surprised at his words. She had imagined that Greg preferred working in the unbroken quiet and relative luxury of his own place. She had believed it was politeness that made him take an interest in her children and the eccentricities of her apartment. "Come on," she said, "let's find some candles and set up inside before everything gets cold."

They arranged themselves and their dinner in front of the fireplace, where an artificial city log already burned blue and pink and gold. It was a cozy atmosphere, a place for lovers. The physical distance between them could be measured in inches, but she didn't have the courage to bridge it or even to ask why it was there.

Instead she returned to the conversation they had started in the kitchen. At least that had been personal. "You know," she said, "I felt the same way you did after Harry left, that there were all kinds of things missing. Not dishes and furniture. Things you can't really describe, so you can't just go out and shop for them."

He smiled sweetly at her, and Kate yearned to run her fingers along the open V of his sweater and trace the familiar planes of his face with her lips. "Even when you know exactly what's gone, Kate, it's not so easy to replace. When you have something right there, in front of you, it's easy to undervalue, to find fault and pick, to lose sight of what's precious. The problem with marriage," he said, "is that you keep waiting for the other fellow to shape up. You don't think about building bridges. And before you know it, the distances get too big, and the moment is gone."

Was he still in love with his ex-wife after all? she wondered. Was that why he had backed off so abruptly? She felt she had to know something more than he was telling her with his be-

havior. "So what do you do after that?" she asked. "After it's gone."

She saw a flicker of comprehension in his eyes. "You try to be a little more careful," he said softly. "So you know you won't keep making the same mistakes with different people."

Yes, she thought, that's what she had been telling herself all these months. Careful was the way to be. Her head urged careful, but her heart did not agree. She stared into Greg's face, taking him into herself. In the static intimacy of the moment, she loved him in her mind's eye, brushing his hair with her mouth, trailing her fingers down his neck, across his shoulders. That way, in her imagination, she held him close, separating herself from her loneliness.

She sighed her frustration. "Well," she said in a ragged voice, "I guess I'd better be going." He might have stopped her, with a word or a touch. But he didn't.

"Damn!" Margo cursed the broken nail that had just torn while she was trying to change the ribbon on her typewriter, a sleek, ultramodern machine that she could barely manage to work. This was not going to be a good day. It was going to be one of those days when minor disasters collected until they knocked you over. Ten o'clock and she was already shaking.

Trying to ignore the petty annoyances, she focused her mind on the big problem, the one that was threatening to put her into an untenable position here. She'd come in this morning to find that Harriett Digregorio, the art director, had taken for herself and her assistant the two best offices on the floor. Earlier in the week, at the senior staff meeting, the publisher had made some reference to the renovations underway. He said that as soon as the carpenters finished working, they could discuss the allocation of spaces. Now Harriett had jumped the gun. Margo was sure the move was deliberate, an attempt on Harriett's part to present her with a *fait accompli*, to show her in a not-too-subtle fashion just how the power structure of the magazine was going to be defined.

Harriett had been flexing her muscles at Margo since they had first been introduced. She lost no opportunity to let her know that the art director was going to be the critical factor in determining the image of the magazine, that Margo was going to have to let Harriett be the final arbiter of all the visual concepts.

Margo had had quite a different understanding from Fabrizio. He had made a point of saying that she and Harriett were both important, each of them autonomous. Yet each of them was expected to work harmoniously with the other to develop the basic look of the magazine. Now Harriett was attempting to put her in a subordinate position.

Margo knew enough about the critical workings of power to understand that each bit of space lost might make it harder to recover. The two women had already had a few minor confrontations. Harriett had tried to insist that she have a voice in the selection of Margo's models, tried in fact to suggest that this practice was routine. Fortunately Margo's past experience in front of the camera told her this was a lie and gave her the confidence to tell Harriett to butt out.

Harriett had also tried to get a piece of Margo's travel perks, the location trips, by insisting that she should be present at all the location shoots. These trips did not mean that much to Margo, who could afford to go anywhere she pleased. But she knew that for Harriett, who worked for money, rather than for personal satisfaction, these location shoots could mean free vacations and an opportunity to establish herself as the major power on the new magazine.

Again, Margo's experience had helped her to resist, but this time the issue had been fought to a draw. Harriett had gone to the Italians and suggested it was important that she and Margo collaborate on shoots, in the interests of creating the best possible prototypes. The Italians agreed that this might be so, at least for the time being. Later, when they were in full production, they would decide whether or not it would be practical for Harriett to accompany Margo on location trips.

Margo had resented that decision enormously. She knew it was critically important to have one clearly defined boss on fashion shoots. There had to be one person who brought it all together, who directed the photographer, the stylist, the hairdresser, the makeup person and the models. And she knew that her own job, not Harriett's, would depend on what she brought back from each shoot.

Harriett had already demonstrated she was going to be no help at all. Yesterday, on the steps of the New York Public Library, Harriett had wreaked confusion and caused bad feelings. She had badgered the photographer and screamed at one of the models. Later, as Margo had tried to smooth things over,

the photographer had let slip a bit of information that had turned Margo pink with rage. Was it true, he had asked, that on the new magazine, it was the art director who would have final say on the choice of photographers?

It was not, Margo had replied, trying to keep control. Why do you ask, she had pressed, knowing full well what the answer would be.

That's the word that's going around, he had said, without being more specific.

He did not have to say any more. Margo was new to the details of administration and management, but she knew a lot about the fashion business. She knew it was Harriett who had put the word around town, so that all the major photographers in the city would know it was she who had the power to dispense all that lucrative work. For Harriett, this would mean a great many people currying favor, either with expensive gifts or hard cash. For Margo, this would mean distorted loyalties. Whenever she and Harriett disagreed, the photographer would look to Harriett for the final word.

She realized that she had taken the wrong attitude in trying to be conciliatory. Her stance had confirmed the rumor that Harriett was in charge.

As she filed her broken nail, Margo tried to consider her options. She could take her case to management. That might be dangerous. Harriett, along with the editor-in-chief, had been hand-picked by the Italians, presumably for their working knowledge of Italian as well as for their publishing experience. It had been rumored that Harriett had a close, one might say, intimate relationship with one of the "boys from Milan," as the secretaries described the top management team.

No, she would not risk losing another confrontation. She would, she decided, drop the nice-guy approach and go to the mat on the next shoot. She would flex her own muscles, demonstrate to everyone present, that she, not Harriett, was the final arbiter of everything that happened. She would do it deftly, and in her own well-bred way, but she would do it. And the message would get around. She would also make sure that she would say nothing that could be used against her. In fact, if she played her cards right, Harriett's quick temper would flare and make her look bad.

As for the matter of the usurped office space, well, that was going to be a little tougher. She didn't know what to do, now

that Harriett and her flunky had established squatters' rights. She sighed heavily. Where in all those career books, in all those dress-for-success pieces, was a survival guide to office politics? If I survive this job, she thought, I should write one of those myself. It could be a real eye-opener for any woman who believed that all you had to do was perform your job functions and all would be well.

## Chapter 31

THE book was finished, the galleys proofed and the publication date scheduled. Kate felt exhilarated and let down at the same time—satisfied with a job well done and apprehensive about what would happen to her relationship with Greg.

She had hoped for some clues that there might be new reasons, new ways for them to spend time together, but he had given her none. Most of all she hoped that they could be lovers, now that the need to be professional was out of the way. She had fantasized a celebratory evening that began with champagne and laughter and ended with Greg in her arms. And when he failed to suggest anything of the kind, she took the initiative and invited herself to his apartment.

Now, as she stood outside his door, wearing a new white wool dress with a neckline cut down to “there,” carrying a chilled bottle of champagne, she felt more nervous than festive. What was she doing pursuing a man who only seemed interested in her mind? And on a temporary basis at that.

Her insecurity mounted as he opened the door. “Hi,” he said. And though his mouth shaped a welcoming smile, his soft brown eyes were serious, his manner subdued. He looked a little ruffled, in that way she found so endearing, as though he had napped in the pullover and chino pants he was wearing.

She followed him into the study—“their” place—and sat down, a little primly, on the edge of the leather sofa where she had spent so many hours curled up with pages of manuscript on her lap. She felt overdressed in her cut-out sandals and sheer stockings and the full makeup she’d done for the occasion. She felt awkward, too, as if the project’s end had suddenly made them strangers.

“Here,” she said, handing him the bottle of wine.

"Thank you," he said formally. As he turned to get some glasses, she watched the familiar movements of his body and wondered how all this distance had been created. She would have sworn that he had been attracted to her, as much as she had been drawn to him, but somehow he had managed over these past months to put himself out of reach.

"Cheers," she said brightly, clinking her glass against his. He sipped his wine; she downed hers almost frantically, hoping to effervesce the atmosphere a little. "So," she said, trying again for some lightness, "what have you been up to?"

"Not much," he answered, making no reference to the fact that they had not seen or spoken to each other in almost two weeks.

"You must find yourself with a lot of free time now," she pressed on.

"I suppose."

The conversation limped along on truncated bits of small talk, as they worked their way through the champagne, the atmosphere growing heavier with each glass. Finally she couldn't stand it any longer.

"Hey," she said, "we're supposed to be celebrating a job well done and all that stuff, remember?"

"I don't feel much like celebrating," he said, staring at her, and she felt that his eyes were full of unspoken thoughts.

She got up and went to the machine that had played dozens of classical tapes when they worked. She put on the radio and turned the dial until she found some dance music. "Come on, Dr. Hardy," she said, taking him by the hand. "School's out and we're going to celebrate. I don't know why you're being so resistant."

"Don't you." His voice was flat, his expression strained. She searched her memory for some way in which she might have offended him, but she could think of nothing.

This man who had been collaborator, companion, at moments almost a friend, nearly a lover, was sending out some very strange signals. Perhaps it was his way of saying that they should now get on with their separate lives. That he was ready to move on, to fill his evenings with something else. With someone else.

That possibility and the champagne made her reckless. If this was it, if she was going to be demoted to a face in the crowd, she wasn't going to let it happen in her old passive way.

He took her into his arms, halfway, gingerly, moving tentatively to the music. They danced well together. She wasn't surprised. She pressed closer and he started. "What's the matter?" she asked, laughing. "Are you afraid of me, Dr. Hardy?" she demanded, thinking how bold and unlike herself she sounded. And how free it felt not to stand on ceremony.

He said nothing, pulling her even closer, until her breasts were flattened against his chest, until she felt his breath against her ear, his pelvic bones moving with hers. Almost defiantly, she thrust herself against him as they danced, challenging his masculinity, blushing as she did so and asking herself what in hell she thought she was doing. She felt his breathing grow heavier against her face, the roughness of his cheek pressing into hers. She opened her eyes and saw that his were closed.

As they danced, she felt lighter and softer than she had ever felt, carried along on the sheer joy of having him so close. Their steps grew slower and smaller, and when the music stopped, they were scarcely moving at all. He dropped his hands to the small of her back and she felt a rush of desire that nearly buckled her knees. She brushed his face with her hands and wrapped them around his neck. She took a deep breath and kissed him, long and hard, just as she had imagined so many times, ran her tongue along his teeth, tasting the sweetness of him. She swayed against him and they hung there for just a moment.

Without loosing the tight grip he had on her, he led her to his bed. He stripped off his sweater and his trousers and she fell upon him fully clothed, hungry for the touch of his lips, the feel of his skin against hers. She fought her way out of her dress and underwear, as they searched one another, driven by a ferocity that blurred the landscapes of their bodies and stirred a passion that shuddered through them both.

There was no separateness, no unfamiliarity between them. She stroked him hard, guided him inside her, shivering with the warmth that started somewhere in the center of her being and built, rippling through her as they moved together, building to a climax that trembled her body and sent her almost to the brink of unconsciousness.

They lay still, wrapped in each other, dazed and spent and breathless. She felt as if she had just discovered in herself a hunger that would never be completely fed, a need for which there would never be enough. In her wildest fantasies of sex with Greg, she had never imagined herself capable of such

wanton and disorderly feelings. She felt as if she had wandered into a place she would never want to leave.

"Greg?" she whispered, touching his face. But he had fallen asleep, his head cradled between her breasts. She sighed contentedly and closed her eyes, drifting off gently into a dreamless sleep.

A month later, Paul gave Kate what he called a "proper" celebration dinner at Elaine's. And although Kate was barely a fledgling in the world of New York's literati, Paul's face opened doors at the small but rather elitist East Side restaurant. As they were seated at a table near Woody Allen's, Kate gaped openly, while Paul, sensing the stares that were directed at him, simply became more theatrical than usual.

"This is a memorable moment," he said, waving his arm, to the accompaniment of Kate's giggles. "Here we are, my protégée, my old friend, my dear Kate—a real, live author, soon to be on *The New York Times* best-seller list. I want to give you a party, a smashing, wonderful New York party. I absolutely insist. Everyone will fuss over you; I'll insist on that. In fact, I won't invite anyone who won't adore you."

"Oh, Paul, you're still too much. Why should anyone fuss over me? Your friends are all accomplished people. Being an author, let alone a best-selling author, maybe, is a big deal for me. And it all feels like dumb luck. Except for having a good friend like you who started it all."

"I'll accept the compliment," he said, preening a little. "And the credit for being your Svengali or Professor Higgins or whatever. But, Kate, you did it, and that makes you as accomplished as anyone I know, with the possible exception of myself. I'm proud of you and I insist on the right to celebrate you. Professor Higgins took Liza to the ball, and the principle here is much the same. So with your permission, missy, I'm going to launch one of my soirees *sans pareille*. Be appreciative or I promise to sulk."

"I am appreciative, Paul. It's sweet, and I thank you—and it will give you a chance to get to know Greg, my collaborator."

"Your collaborator? Do I detect a note of *tendresse* in that phrase? Do you mean collaborator in the professional sense—or something of a more intimate nature?"

She laughed. "You're so smart, Paul. Yes, it's both."

"And how long has this been going on, missy? I'm really quite offended that you haven't informed me."

"Actually the second part hasn't been going on that long, and I'm 'informing' you now. I wouldn't keep anything important from you."

"Aha," he said triumphantly. "The lady is using the word *important*. I take it this affair is more than a wanton fling on your part?"

"Oh, Paul," she laughed. "It's funny that you use that word *wanton*," she said, and then started to blush. "It's been . . ." She faltered. "I can't explain . . . it's strange and wonderful and I don't really understand it all . . ."

"Never mind," he said, suddenly serious and uncharacteristically gentle. "You're allowed not to understand, all those self-help books of yours to the contrary. *Strange and wonderful* is—wonderful—and you can just live it."

"Okay," she laughed again. "That sounds like good advice. So you'll meet Greg and tell me what you think, okay?"

"Not only okay, but definitely. And if he's not good enough for you, I'll feel free to express my disapproval."

True to his word, Paul outdid himself in preparing for Kate's party. A group of strolling Italian musicians was hired to provide an atmosphere of romance, a caterer who specialized in shortcut nouvelle cuisine to show the guests that Kate had arrived.

The guest list was carefully assembled. As a concession to Kate, he invited the women from her group to share in her celebration. His sense of humor had made him include (with Kate's permission) Johnny Love. His sense of mischief had made him instruct Harry (without Kate's permission) to stop by and prepare a press release for the gossip columns. When Harry had balked, arguing that an assistant could easily handle such a routine assignment, Paul had added a quiet and somewhat threatening reminder that he was too important a client to settle for the ministrations of an assistant.

Kate, too, approached the party in a mood of extravagant exhilaration. In spite of her disclaimers to Paul, she did feel that the evening was part of a milestone in her life. It was part of all that was new and valuable. She was no longer the very average and very grateful young woman who believed that Harry's love and attention were part of a once-in-a-lifetime stroke of luck. In some strange way, she had gone full cycle, back to the girl she had been in school, the girl who'd taken an active part in shaping her own life, day by day. She felt

the same buoyancy and energy she'd had then, but now it was different, tempered with experience and a maturity that showed her what was possible and manageable. The experience made her cherish what was valuable: Sarah and Josh, her friends, her work and, yes, Greg. But it also made her promise herself that she would never cripple herself again, never allow herself to become so afraid, just to hold onto what she valued. Wonderful things were like butterflies, she thought. You couldn't protect them by being afraid, by hoping they wouldn't change, by praying they would never go away. Speak your mind, she told herself. Fight for what you want, surrender when you have to and be prepared to survive any of it.

She fairly sparkled as she dressed for the evening. Good-bye average. Tonight would be pure glamour. This time she would enjoy Paul's brand of entertaining, get into it, be part of it, not just a bemused bystander.

She had chosen a long dress of cream-colored jersey that clung to her body and belted it with a dramatic circlet of hammered brass set with semiprecious stones. Her ivory satin high-heeled sandals made her legs look long and very slender. Her jewelry was simple: a pair of chunky gold earrings that Harry had bought her to celebrate his first major account.

She brushed her hair, which fairly shone with golden highlights, into a fluffy nimbus that surrounded her face. And by the time Greg arrived, she felt like Cinderella, without a midnight curfew.

His eyes lit up when he saw her. "Well," he said softly, "looks like we have enough party going on right here." He gathered her close for a hug and a kiss, lingering for a moment, his lips against her ear—until they were interrupted by the sound of children giggling. They broke apart, and there were Josh and Sarah, standing in the doorway.

"Your mom looks pretty wonderful tonight, don't you think?" Greg said smoothly.

Josh giggled in response, but Sarah said, in her best adult voice: "It's okay. A little flashy, but I guess it's okay for a party."

Something in her daughter's attitude made Kate go to Sarah's side. "Excuse me for a minute," she said, as she led Sarah into her room.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, convinced that there was when Sarah kept her eyes cast down while she shook her head. "Are you upset because I'm going out tonight?" she persisted.

"Is that it? We're only going to Paul's, and we won't be very late."

Sarah shook her head again.

"What is it then? Is it Greg? Is it because I'm going with Greg?" she asked, remembering the overheard conversation between Josh and Sarah about him.

Sarah looked up, an expression of bewilderment on her face. "You're different since you started going out with him, Mommy. Josh and I wanted you to have fun and not be sad like you were before. We liked it when you went out with Bobby Lee. He was nice, and you weren't different with him."

The observation startled her, though it was perfectly true. Bobby Lee hadn't mattered, not in that particular way that a man matters to a woman, and Greg did. That's what made her *different*, lit her up, made her pulse race, her nerve endings tingle. That's what made her a different Mom from the one they had known before, and the change was apparently making Josh and Sarah a little apprehensive.

"You're right, Sarah," she said, "I am different. It's because Greg is special to me. Being with him is special, and it makes me feel wonderful. But it doesn't change anything about you and me and Josh. I'll always be your mother, no matter who else is in my life. Maybe you've been feeling that I haven't been paying enough attention to you lately, what with the book and Greg..."

Sarah stared at her mother, then dropped her eyes again and asked in a low voice: "Are you and Greg... are you and Greg... you know... doing that stuff we talked about?"

And there it was: one of the standard letters from her column, "What Do I Tell My Children About My Lover?" She'd always advised honesty, with discretion and sensitivity. And now she felt that this combination could be a very tall order. "Yes," she answered, simply and without embellishment. "Yes, we are."

Strangely enough, Sarah seemed to relax, now that the question had been asked and answered. "Well," she said, again in her mock adult voice, "I suppose that means he'll be living with us soon or something."

"I don't know," Kate answered. "I don't think we're up to that part yet."

"Well, what is it?" Sarah probed, impatient, as if Kate were a recalcitrant child. "Are you just going to hang around with him, and then he's going to disappear like Bobby Lee?"

And then Kate understood the rest of the question. Is it safe to like Greg? And what kind of a mom hangs around with men she's not serious about?

Here she had no ready explanation. "I don't know what to tell you, except that it was very different with Bobby Lee. I knew he wouldn't be around for very, very long. He and I—we just comforted each other when times were hard for both of us. But that isn't enough reason for people to stay together, not in the way you're talking bout. It's different with Greg, but we just don't know enough about each other to say that we're going to live together. Could we just leave it at that for now? I promise I'll tell you what's happening just as soon as I know myself."

Sarah sighed, not quite satisfied. "Okay, I guess . . . but I'll tell you this—Josh liked Bobby Lee a lot better."

"And what about you, Sarah?"

She smiled mischievously at her mother. "I'll tell you as soon as I know."

Kate laughed and hugged her daughter. "Fair enough."

Kate was feeling a little thoughtful when she and Greg arrived at Paul's apartment, but her mood lifted almost at once, amid the hum of cocktail chatter and the popping of champagne corks.

"Authors, authors," Paul called out when he saw them, swooping down to wrap Kate in his long, slender arms. "And don't you look smashing," he sighed. "Why, I remember when I could count on you for discreet understatement. And here you are, getting more and more brazen with each public appearance."

Kate laughed. "Sarah said *flashy*, but I guess she'd agree with you."

"The child is right. Flashy, you little tramp—but adorable. And this must be the good Dr. Hardy, though not too good, I trust."

Kate made the introductions and moved toward a white-jacketed waiter bearing drinks, leaving Greg and Paul alone. She sipped a glass of champagne and watched the two of them. From the sound of Paul's laughter and the relaxed attitude of Greg's body, she had a feeling she'd be hearing some positive responses on both sides.

When Paul rejoined her later, over crystal bowls of caviar

and sour cream, he gave her a sharp nudge in the ribs and said: "Well done, missy. Your wanton affair is very cute and, I suspect, very sexy, yes?"

"Yes," she whispered. "And keep your voice down, for God's sake. How would you like people discussing your sexuality over hors d'oeuvres?"

"I'm sure they do, quite often, at least I hope so. I wouldn't care if they wrote my name on the walls of telephone booths—being sexy is nothing to be ashamed of. And," he nudged her again, "it seems to have done you a world of good."

"Thanks," she smiled, squeezing his arm. "Come on—dance with me. I want one go-round with the most beautiful man in the room. And maybe the nicest."

"I won't argue there, and since this is your night, Madame Sherwood, you certainly do deserve the nicest." He swept her into the center of the room and whirled her grandly to the accompaniment of "Strangers in the Night." And once again she felt like Cinderella. Only better—because by midnight she hoped to be snuggled in Greg's arms.

As it turned out, she didn't have to wait that long. As the musicians segued into a violin-dominated version of "I Have But One Heart," Greg appeared and tapped Paul on the shoulder. "May I?" he asked.

"I suppose you must." Paul gave a mock sigh. "But see that you deserve this sweet thing—or you'll answer to me."

"I like your friend," Greg said, pulling her close.

"He likes you, too. I'm glad."

"Well, then, since we have his blessing, maybe we'd better think about playing house."

"What?"

"I said, maybe we should think about taking the next step in this dance. You're not really surprised, are you?"

"No," she said, "but it's funny you're saying it tonight. My children seem to have the same thing on their minds."

"Good. What did you say to them?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes were riveted on Paul—standing with Harry and Laurie at the bar, deep in conversation. Actually Paul was doing all the talking, smiling and gesturing expansively. Harry was frowning, and Laurie seemed to be listening to the bartender.

"Oh, boy," she muttered.

"Oh, boy—that's what you said to your kids?"

"No, that's what I'm saying to myself right now. Harry's here. Over there—with his lady. I see Paul's fine artistic hand in this, and it's making me nervous."

"You can handle it, Kate. And I'm here."

"My hero," she quipped, and was sorry the minute it slipped out. "I didn't mean that," she apologized. "I really am nervous. Oh, God, he's coming over here. Paul's bringing them over here."

Greg squeezed her shoulders, just as Paul swept up to them, trailing a reluctant Harry. "Time for business, children," he announced. "Harry, this is Dr. Greg Hardy. And Kate, of course, you already know," he added, scarcely trying to hide his enjoyment of the moment. "I'm sure you can prepare an adequate item, no, a glowing one, about our Kate. But do take a moment to talk with Dr. Hardy. Get a few scintillating quotes. And oh, yes, I don't want to tell you your business, Harry, but maybe a little romance would be in order here—you know, something about how writing a book about love and such leads to real-life romance."

"I don't know why you think this is necessary," Harry growled. "Kate and Dr. Hardy have their own publicity people."

"Well, of course," Paul agreed sweetly. "But tonight—well, tonight is my celebration of Kate. And I'm sure I don't have to remind you of how much she deserves celebrating. I want everyone to know about it—don't you agree?"

Harry muttered something unintelligible and went back to the bar with Greg, leaving Kate to cast an accusing stare at Paul. "And what," she demanded, "was *that* all about?"

"Don't be annoyed, Kate. I won't allow it. My artist's eye simply *cried* for this crowning touch to your success. Don't you see, it's perfect now. Oh, come, surely you see the sheer poetry of it all? Harry leaves you for Miss Glitz over there, and by the way, you look *much* more glitzy than she does tonight. Then you, having been set free, verily liberated, from the job of ministering to him, go on to make a place for yourself in the very world he services. And, the icing on the cake, here you are with a replacement for Harry—a much nicer man than Harry ever was, I'm sure. So how could I not rub his nose in it? How could I not? I knew if I'd asked, you'd say no. But I remembered you, all sad and forlorn and lonely, and I just had to. Say you understand—say it right away—I insist."

"All right, Paul, I do," she smiled. "You're right—it's all

very poetic, and I suppose that doesn't happen that often. Thank you for caring enough to do this. All of it."

"Believe me," he smiled, "it was my pleasure. All of it."

The rest of the party was almost anticlimactic, though Kate did relax enough to enjoy the music and the company and the elegant late supper, after Harry and Laurie had left.

And as she and Greg headed home in a cab, he kissed her lightly on the nose and asked: "Well, have you thought about my proposition?"

"You mean about living in sin?"

"I wouldn't have put it that way, but yes, okay, if you insist on making a joke of everything serious..."

"It sounds like an interesting idea..."

"But?"

"It isn't a *but* exactly... more like an *and*... I'm just thinking we should take the time to know each other better. After all, I do have two children, and I don't want them to have to live through something that might be over in a minute and a half."

Greg winced visibly, but when he spoke, his voice was even. "I'm disappointed you think we only have a minute and a half in us, Kate. People can get a lot of mileage out of what we have and something called commitment."

"I know about commitment," she said indignantly. "I just don't know that much about us together. If I don't have that, then living together would be like one long date. I'd be afraid to make mistakes, thinking you'd leave, just like Harry did. I don't want to be like that, not ever again, and I need to be sure I won't."

"But, Kate," he said, slipping into exasperation, "how in hell are you supposed to get this conviction—in a dream? Can't you trust me enough to take this risk with me? Is that getting through to you, Miss Always-So-Reasonable?"

She was alarmed by the edge in his voice, by the impatience that bordered on anger, but her newfound resolution kept her calm. "Look, Greg, I understand what you're saying, but couldn't we put this off for just a little while? We have all those publicity things coming up—we'll be together most of the time anyway. Later, when everything quiets down, we can talk about it again. What about that?"

"That sounds very reasonable," he said almost sarcastically, making the word *reasonable* sound like something distasteful.

And when he brought her home, he gave her a kiss that lacked enthusiasm, declined her offer of a nightcap and anything else she had in mind.

She went to bed wondering how Greg, a man who must have seen hundreds of relationships falter because people hadn't taken the time to know one another, who had lived through a failed marriage because he hadn't taken the time to measure his weaknesses—how he could blame her for wanting to understand and deal with her own. For his sake, as well as for hers. He should know better, she thought defiantly. She fell into a restless sleep, wondering how on earth people had ever imagined that love was easy.

## Chapter 32

"I JUST don't understand it," Margo was shaking her head in genuine bewilderment. "I just don't understand how rotten women can be to each other."

The rest of the women listened attentively, as she finished her list of complaints, begining with the small sabotages committed by women who were supposed to be working for her and ending with her struggle with Harriett DiGregorio. When she finished, she looked around, hopeful of some ready solutions to all her problems.

"Can't help you," Rose Mancini said apologetically. "I quit my job before Joey was born. Even when I did work, all I had to do was keep the company books and collect my salary on Friday."

"Yeah," Ellen agreed. "Office politics are Greek to me, too. So let's take a look at the cast of characters in this little melodrama. This Harriett—she's a different type from you, right?"

Margo didn't hesitate a moment. "I certainly hope so."

"Okay," Ellen continued. "Here's what I'm getting at: She needs the job, you don't. You have all kinds of goodies, she doesn't. She's probably jealous as hell, and who could blame her?"

"But that isn't fair," Margo protested. "I haven't done anything . . ."

"Oh, grow up," Ellen interrupted. "Whoever said that life was fair? Just look at yourself, Margo. Do you call that fair? I remember the first day you showed up here—I thought to myself, Oh, brother."

"Oh, brother?"

"Yeah—oh, brother, this dame doesn't belong here. Let's face it, Margo, you have a lot. A lot that other women would

kill for. And if life was fair, they wouldn't have to be feeling that way."

Margo's eyes flashed angrily. "All right," she said, her voice rising. "So I have a lot. Does that mean I'm not allowed to have problems like everyone else?"

"No, dear, of course it doesn't," Janine said soothingly. "I think Ellen means it could be hard for other women to feel sympathetic toward you. When they get to know you, then they can see what a lovely person you are."

"Thanks, Janine. But what am I supposed to do if I just want to get along with someone like Harriett? Run around in rags and pretend I'm someone else?"

"Don't get so touchy," Ellen said. "I'm just trying to get you to see where Harriett is—and how she sees you. She's a street fighter; you're not. You can't win if you let her call the shots. Use the edge you have, and maybe you can win."

"I didn't know I had an edge. She's the one with experience. And I told you, I think she has an in with the Italians."

"So do you, Margo. A better one. You're the only one on that magazine who isn't just an employee. That makes you equal with the brass. So what if Harriett is somebody's girl friend? Maybe it's a rumor she's spreading around, just to scare the likes of you. But even if it's true, so what? Office romances don't always pay off, and she's still an employee. But you—you're someone with money and style and social standing. That's your edge, Margo, and it's a real one. Use it, kid, use it."

"How?"

"Okay, this business about the office. Harriett just grabbed the space. She figures you're too much of a lady to just march in and throw her assistant out. So—why don't you just fake her out. Do it. But with some style."

"And how do I do that?"

"Well," Ellen said slowly, "how about after hours? You've got all these electricians and carpenters working, right?"

"Right."

"How long until they finish?"

"I don't know—a few more days, I think."

"So why don't you make a little private deal with a couple of these guys? Spread around some of that money you have. Get them to move your stuff in, her stuff out, after hours, on the quiet. When it's done, this Harriett could be mad as hell, but she won't have a leg to stand on. She can't go to the brass

and throw you out for an assistant. If she says anything to you, play innocent. Say you thought she understood her arrangements were temporary. Just make sure you get settled in. Permanently. Have your stuff bolted to the floor, if you have to. Make sure everything in that office says 'Margo Pellegrini,' loud and clear."

As Ellen finished describing her scheme, Margo was smiling broadly. "I don't know," she said. "It's an audacious idea, and it just might work."

"Give it a shot," Ellen said. "Don't just let it go by default."

"I will," Margo promised.

"Before we call it a night," Myra said, "I think we should take a minute and offer Kate our congratulations. I saw some advance reviews of your book. It sounds as if you and Dr. Hardy did a good job."

"Yeah," Kate said. "I think we have a hit, as Ellen would say. The publisher thinks so, too. They got the book out in record time. And we're going out on a promotional tour for six weeks. Boston, Washington, Chicago, Seattle—and we finish in Los Angeles."

"That sounds wonderful," Rose said wistfully. "All that traveling with a man you love . . . your kids waiting home for you . . . it's been so long since I went anywhere . . ."

Kate got up and put her arms around the other woman's shoulders. "I'm sorry things are so hard for you, Rose. I hope it gets better soon . . ."

"Okay, Kate," Ellen interrupted, trying to lighten the atmosphere, as she so often did, "since you're on a roll now, you'd better enjoy it—for all of us. Don't mess up, or you get thirty lashes when you get back. Understood?"

"Understood." Kate laughed. "I promise to enjoy every minute—and I'll try not to mess up."

"I'm going to miss you," Margo said to Kate, as they walked out of the church hall together. "I'm glad you have this trip coming up, and I'm glad the book is going to do well, but I wish you were going to be around for a while. I need an ally right now. Some days, that office feels like a war zone."

Kate thought for a minute. "Have you ever thought about asking Mario about some of your problems? He's been doing all kinds of high-level business transactions for years. He's good at it. Don't you think he could give you some good advice?"

"Mario!" Margo's tone made her husband's name sound like an epithet. "He'd love to hear me say what I just said in there—that I'm out of my depth, that I'm scared, that I don't know the first thing about office politics, that those countrymen of his can reduce me to jelly when they look at me cross-eyed. He's just been waiting for me to fail. As far as our marriage goes, that would be worse for me than if I never had tried at all. If I tell him I'm in trouble, I'd just be giving him the perfect opening—to tell me to just give it all up."

"But, Margo," Kate persisted, "why can't you just tell him up front that you have no intentions of quitting? Then ask him if he's willing to give you any help. If he is, at least you could be sure it would be the right kind of help. Mario might be fighting you on this career, but I think he has too much class to give you bad advice. Do it, Margo—what have you got to lose?"

"My pride," Margo answered promptly. "I just don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing I'm in trouble."

"Margo," Kate said gently, "don't you think he might already have some idea that you're in a little over your head? How could he think any less of you for being frank about it?"

Margo looked at her friend and laughed. "No wonder you're writing an advice column. Maybe you're right. Maybe there isn't much to lose at that. Relations on the domestic front aren't all that wonderful as it is."

"I'm sorry about that, I really am. Sometimes I feel a little guilty, you know. I feel as if I started something that upset the balance in your marriage."

"Maybe you did, Kate. But I needed something to happen. Underneath it all, I feel good about myself. Better than when I had all those empty days to fill."

Kate looked doubtful. Margo did seem more energetic, more vibrant these days, but there were dark smudges of fatigue around her eyes and tension lines around the mouth that hadn't been there before. "Look," she said, "I'm the last one to say something like this, but be careful, please. Just be careful. Don't get careless with what you have because it isn't perfect. You're always talking about the good things that happened to me after Harry. Lots of times, when I was feeling all alone, I used to think that if he knocked on my door and said he wanted to try again, I would have..."

"No, you wouldn't have, Kate, not after you got on your feet. Maybe you thought so, but I know you wouldn't have."

Kate laughed. "No, maybe I wouldn't have. But you're not me. You have a viable marriage, not a failed one. So just take a little care of it, that's all I'm saying."

Margo thought about what she had said to Kate, as she let herself into the apartment. It was true that she felt more alive, more . . . involved, in spite of her problems. Toward Mario, she had a tremendous ambivalence. At times, she looked at him and saw very clearly what it was that attracted her in the first place. He was still very attractive, his body still lean and hard, with not an ounce of excess fat on it. He took care of himself in the same precise, methodical way he attended to his business. The same precise way he attended to his marriage. Maybe that was it—maybe that was why she had become so unsettled where he was concerned. The civilized marriage had palled, and she had found that she yearned for passion, any kind of passion, for jagged emotional peaks when the heart soared—even if they were followed with crashing bouts of despair.

She closed the door behind her, expecting only the quiet of an empty house. The maid was off tonight, and her son was spending the night with a friend. She was surprised to hear the television from the den.

When she investigated, she found her husband sprawled across the sofa, with a bottle of red wine and some bread and cheese on a tray.

"I must say," he began when he saw her, "this represents a serious decline in the quality of life here—when I return from a very taxing business trip, and all I can find to eat is bread and cheese."

Margo was automatically ready to apologize when she saw the frown on her husband's face, the petulant set of his mouth. And then she remembered that Thelma had prepared a particularly good meal that evening and that the remnants had been carefully wrapped and put away in the refrigerator. She looked at Mario again, and his displeasure seemed somehow less formidable. His expression seemed to resemble Christopher's, when he was disappointed or frustrated.

"There's a good deal more than bread and cheese in the fridge," she said. "If you had bothered to look, you would have found it. Unless you're sulking about the fact that I wasn't here to serve it. And what are you doing home tonight anyway? You weren't due until tomorrow. Furthermore, you're not the

only one who's had a taxing time. My day has been miserable. If you had the slightest interest in anything I do, you'd help me out of an impossible situation." As her outburst wound down, Margo stood there, defiant in her posture, though she was in fact afraid she had gone too far.

Yet Mario did not seem angry. "Help you? What are you talking about?" He seemed interested, his pique at the meager dinner apparently put aside. "You . . . never asked me to help you."

"That's because you never wanted me to have this job to begin with. You've never wished me well. You'd be pleased if I got fired. Admit it."

He thought for a moment, in that slow, methodical way that often infuriated her, particularly when her own temper was out of control. "It's true I never wanted you to have this job," he said, "but if I had really wanted to stop you, all I would have had to do was say a word or two to Fabrizio. Remember that, my dear. I simply could not see how you could manage a responsible position without neglecting your obligations to your home and your family. And as you can see," he said, pointing to his dinner tray, "I was right. But the slippage in housekeeping is not the only change that has distressed me. There is also the matter of your . . . attitude. There was a time not very long ago when you seemed to be perfectly content to be what you were. And not without reason, I think. Now—now you seem to have become argumentative and arbitrarily difficult. Everything you do seems to be some sort of challenge, which you take pleasure in hurling in my face. You've changed, Margo. And not for the better, I think."

She was frustrated and annoyed that he was turning her infant career into a personal affront, but she tried to keep her mind clear, her voice calm. She could never have a rational argument with Mario when she was upset; her passion was never a match for his cool, cutting logic. "I suppose," she said, "that any kind of change would be 'not for the better' where you were concerned. A wife and a child in one tidy package, mistresses to play with—it's not a bad status quo. For you."

"And is this . . . this new career of yours a revenge for my status quo, as you call it?"

She met his eyes, which had become dangerously cold, and tried not to panic. "I think you know," she said quietly, "that if it was revenge I wanted, there would have been a much more direct way of getting it, don't you think?"

He seemed to have no answer for this, so he returned abruptly to her original statement. "You said something about needing my help. What did you mean?"

There was something in his voice that made her feel that he was genuinely curious, that he was not going to be sarcastic or patronizing, so she answered honestly. "It's the politics of the job, Mario. The job itself is difficult enough for me. I've had to learn each step while I'm doing it. From Kate and from the people who are supposed to be working with me and for me. I've had to do this without letting them see my inexperience. And so far I've managed to keep my head above water. But now, recently, we've had to start assembling a full staff, to gear up for full production. What's been happening is this: I've managed to hire a couple of people who are really better qualified for my job than I am. And what they've been doing is trying to undermine me, showing off their abilities to the Italians. I don't have any solutions. If I hire people who are less competent than I am, I know I'll be in serious trouble. But as it is, I feel as if I'm working under siege."

He had nodded his understanding while she described her problem. His response was quick. "What's happening to you is not so unusual, Margo. I can tell you something very simply about the psychology of power in business. The practice, however, is not quite so simple. You have to do it for yourself, and you have to learn from the dynamics of your own particular situation. Do you follow me?"

"Yes."

"Good. There is very definitely an art to the successful practice of business. It is perhaps a little more precise than, say, the art of painting or sculpture, but the principles are similar. If you apply these principles by rote, you will certainly have successful results of a sort. Pedestrian, perhaps, but that is good enough for most people. Just as pedestrian works of art and music will satisfy some people. Fine work comes out of a certain originality of vision. Business is not so different. Many people fail to realize this, but those who do understand are capable of creative and daring work, providing of course, they also have a keen understanding of human psychology and a capacity for thinking clearly and quickly in any kind of situation."

Margo was fascinated. In all the years she had been with Mario, she had rarely heard him say more than a dozen words about his business. She knew he made a great deal of money.

And she knew, in spite of his cool demeanor, that there were times when his work went particularly well. She had learned to read the signs: the gleam in those icy hazel eyes, which gave way to a petulant frown around the mouth, when people or events were not following his master plan.

She thought back to the time when they had first started to date. Had he talked about his work then? No, she recalled, he had seemed more interested in her world, the world of fashion photographers and glossy magazine spreads, of surface beauty and its not-so-glamorous mundane underpinnings. She had, at some point, out of some benighted notion of dating etiquette—"be sure to ask about his work, be interested in what he does"—tried to draw him out, with what must have been stupid and inane questions. He had smiled benevolently, amused by her efforts, and turned the conversation adroitly back to her. When had he stopped asking about her? She knew the answer to that. When she had become his wife.

Now, after years of routine nonconversation, he was talking to her. The change had stirred an unfamiliar response in her. At this moment she found him more attractive, more desirable than she had in a long time. Yet ironically she felt she could not tell him, not now, not when he was finding her so imperfect. Instead she said: "I never thought of business in quite the way you've described. I only thought of it as a way of making money."

He smiled, amused now. "Well, we must not underestimate the value of making money, must we? Perhaps if I had not demonstrated the power of that for you, we might not be sitting here at this moment."

His words surprised her. It was true that when she had fallen in love with Mario, she had loved his wealth, his power, his ability to do things for her. She didn't know if she would have loved a poor version, who would not, after all, be the same man. She frowned, trying to find a way of expressing this idea, without sounding crass and materialistic.

"Never mind, my dear," he said, smiling his ironic smile this time. "I don't mean to minimize the attraction of money, especially to someone who has not always had it. And you are certainly not alone in that. But when it is the only motivation, in business, it tends to attract drones, some quite talented ones, who never see beyond the mechanics of the simplest tasks and decisions. Now you, my dear, have taste and flair. You have acquired these over the years, along with an ease with people.

I have watched you over the years, you know. These are all fine assets. Alone, they would probably have put you in some middle-range position. Now, with Fabrizio's intervention, you have an opportunity to stretch yourself. If you can meet all the challenges that have been put in your way, I think you will find a great deal of satisfaction. Winning is always pleasurable, but winning against odds is the best."

Once again Margo thought how different this conversation was from their usual discussions of dinner parties, travel arrangements and other domestic trivia, different even from their occasional talks about books or film or theater. "Do you think I can win, Mario?"

He looked at her, as if he was seeing for the first time the set of her jaw, the kind of determination that had sent her into unknown territory. "Yes," he said, "I think you can win. If you want to badly enough, and if you do what needs to be done."

"But you still haven't told me—specifically—what that might be."

"Specifically, you have to teach those who work for you that it is unprofitable—and quite possibly dangerous to work behind your back. You must make it very clear that loyalty to you is as much a job function as ability. You must demonstrate that any lapse in loyalty is grounds for dismissal."

"And how do I do that?"

"You tell people, my dear. You don't play guessing games. When you hire them, you make it clear that petty intrigues might be tolerated but not where they concern you. And you must have a talk with the Italians. Make it clear that you are the one who makes all decisions concerning your department, that autonomy is a condition of your employment. Say that if, by chance, someone from your department brings an idea, a suggestion or a complaint, you want it to be referred back immediately to you. And you must do this in such a way that does not reflect any insecurity on your part. Rather you should express this as a normal and natural expectation in such a position as yours. Make it very clear that you know everything that goes on—even if you don't at this time. It will show that you are in charge, that you have a good grasp of everything going on around you."

Margo nodded appreciatively, admiring the clarity of his thought, the precision of his directions.

"One more thing," he continued. "Since the nature of your

work takes you out of the office very often, I think you need a surrogate set of eyes and ears there. A secretary, or an assistant, someone who belongs completely to you, rather than to the firm."

"Yes," she said. "That makes sense. My secretary, I think. She has no ambitions of her own. Yes," she repeated, "that makes very good sense. I . . . thank you, Mario. Thank you. I appreciate your help." Suddenly she was shy—with her own husband, perhaps as the result of this rather novel conversation.

"You're quite welcome, my dear." For a moment it seemed as if he, too, was not completely at ease in this new situation.

She had an impulse to reach over and touch his cheek with her hand, yet she found herself unable to move. It had been so long since any spontaneous emotion had flowered between them. She was afraid, afraid to take the chance that he would look at her with one of those distant, ironic looks that said: Really, Margo, what do you think you are doing? She knew that if he rebuffed her, she would cry. And so she said a civilized polite good night and went to her civilized private bedroom.

She remembered how she had congratulated herself, more than once, on this luxurious personal environment of hers. It preserves romance and shelters illusions, she'd said. Yet how many times, and now more than ever, had she wished that she and Mario would be forced to share the same bed. Instead, they were inhabiting private spaces, surrounded by private moats, separated by kind words unspoken and tender gestures unborn.

As Margo slipped on her crepe de chine gown and slid in between the embroidered Madeira sheets, she tried to push away the restlessness that had become a regular part of her life. It was as if she had stirred up a muddy sediment of possibilities and left it swirling around her, not knowing how it would settle or what design would finally take shape.

As she sat in the corner office she had fought for and reclaimed a short week ago, Margo sipped nervously at her second cup of morning coffee, trying to fill herself with artificial resolve and energy. She had rehearsed and re-rehearsed what she would say and do today, but there was a difference between knowing what to do and doing it well.

In social situations, at parties and receptions and well-planned dinners, Margo was always in command. Long years of practice

had sharpened and honed her social skills. She was able to think on her feet, to deflect an awkward situation, generate an appropriate atmosphere. She could handle a drunken guest, an incompetent caterer or an uneven number for dinner, without missing a beat.

But here, in this new arena, she was a rank beginner. The direct exercise of power and the tactics and strategies of command were unfamiliar. The subtlety of putting people on guard, of serving notice that they were to be afraid of her—this was all very difficult, especially when she was afraid of them.

Still, she had a master teacher. Mario was very good at doing all those things, and she had paid careful attention.

She examined herself carefully in the full-length mirror she'd had installed in the prop room. She had worn her most expensive suit, a burgundy wool challis from Paris, cut on the bias and finished by hand. Her watch was fashioned from a single chunk of platinum, containing the finest movement made by Swiss craftsmen. In short, she had adorned herself with more money than Harriett DiGregorio could hope to see in a year, no matter whom she was sleeping with. Her makeup was perfect, and there was a nervous glitter in her eyes, which might, if she held onto herself, pass for self-assurance.

Satisfied with her appearance, she buzzed for her secretary. "Gloria," she said, "tell Harriett I'd like to see her in my office as soon as possible."

"Yes, Mrs. Pellegrini."

A few minutes later, Gloria tapped on the door. "Mrs. Pellegrini?"

"Yes?"

"Harriett says she's very busy, and it would be better if you could stop by to see her."

Margo started to say something, and then remembered another of Mario's lessons: Don't air your problems in front of the staff. So all she said was: "Thanks, Gloria."

Harriett was testing. Margo knew that—and knowing made her feel stronger. If Harriett was as sure of herself as she pretended, she wouldn't have the need to play this kind of game. Very well, she thought, she couldn't let Harriett win. But she would have to win in a way that wasn't humiliating to her adversary. Still another of Mario's lessons: Don't make enemies unnecessarily.

She penned a note, saying simply: "Let me take you to

lunch. I think it's important that you come." She had Gloria deliver it, and the reply came back that Harriett would meet her at twelve-thirty.

As she carried on her morning's work, Margo's confidence began to grow. Harriett would be manageable. And after lunch, yes, after lunch, she would make certain that nothing like this happened again.

Margo had arranged lunch at La Côte Basque—a place that would never get by on an expense account voucher, as a reminder to Harriett that she came from another world, that she didn't need this job, that success or failure was not a life and death matter for her.

Without consulting Harriett, she ordered a bottle of Veuve Clicquot champagne—pleasant, but not ostentatious. And when they had both made their lunch choices, she came right to the point. "You're a good art director, Harriett. I'm sure you'll make your mark, but you're making a mistake if you think you'll do it by crossing over into my territory."

Harriett looked flustered by Margo's directness. She nervously flipped her black hair over her shoulders. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said, in a voice that suggested injured innocence.

And Margo knew she had her. A smarter opponent wouldn't have taken that tack. She would have seen it was time for cards on the table and started to negotiate. So she moved in, hard. "Yes, you do," she said crisply. "I could review our history for you, but we'll save a lot of time if we skip that. You've been crowding me hard. And," she lied, "the reason I haven't done anything before is that I believed you'd back off once the project was running smoothly. Apparently that was a mistake, because you seem to have drawn some very wrong conclusions. Now I find it's necessary to tell you that our working relationship isn't acceptable. Not at all. It's not necessary for you to be present on my shoots. And if you're going to be there, then it should be understood that you're there as an observer, possibly an adviser. If you must say something, it should be only to me, not to any of the people who work directly for me: the models, the hairdressers, the makeup people, the stylists or the photographers."

Harriett started to speak, but Margo stopped her. "Let me tell you just what I'm prepared to do, Harriett. I'm prepared to call every photographer, every stylist and so on—to make

it clear that I'm the person responsible for the hiring or not hiring and that anyone who forgets that will not work for me again. And if, on any shoot, we have a repeat of what's been happening in the past, I'm prepared to make a scene, to cut you down in front of everyone present. If it's necessary to go even further, I'm prepared to go to the Italians. And if that happens, I wouldn't, if I were you, count on any of your 'connections' to carry the day. I think you'd find that other types of connections, which go back rather far, carry more weight than others." As Margo made her speech, she kept her face relaxed, her voice pleasant and friendly. She watched Harriett's expression, which had become progressively more rigid.

Now, she thought, now was the time to offer the woman an out. Never humiliate an opponent unless it serves a very specific purpose, Mario had said. "I could go that far," she continued, "and I'm prepared to, if it's necessary. But what I'd rather do is work with you, with some very clear boundaries defined. I won't step on your toes—if you stay off mine. What do you say?" she smiled.

Harriett hesitated only a moment. "All right," she said, her voice low, "you win."

"No," Margo said firmly. "We both win. If we can both do our jobs without looking over our shoulders, we'll both be better off. And," she added graciously, more confidently, "if there's anything you want from my department, all you have to do is ask. I'm willing to share—with friends."

"Okay, Margo, I get your point," Harriett said, more relaxed now. "I just want you to know—it wasn't personal."

"I never thought it was," Margo lied, and then attacked her lunch with relish.

It was well after three o'clock when the two women returned to the office, smiling and chatting amicably, a change that was noticed at once by the office staff, who had been watching the tug of war with interest, speculating among themselves as to who might win.

Pleased with the results of her lunch meeting, Margo sent a memo to all the assistants and free-lancers who worked for her department, summoning them to her office at the close of the day.

When the group assembled, she watched them carefully, enjoying the puzzled looks on the faces that surrounded her.

This was the first time she had convened a meeting in such a formal fashion.

"This won't take long," she promised, "but I feel it's time for a review of job functions here. And possibly some changes," she smiled.

Several women shifted in their seats.

"All of you had some magazine experience before coming here, so you should know how important teamwork is. But it's come to my attention that some of you have lost sight of the fact that fashion and beauty is my team, not anyone else's. Management pays your salaries—but your responsibility is to me. More important, so is your loyalty." There was some more shifting. "I'm afraid I can't have any doubt about that. Not here and not now. Since I'm your employer, it's my place to define your jobs. And I'm telling you now that loyalty comes first, right along with ability. For that reason"—she paused to heighten the tension in the room—"for that reason, some of you are going to find pink slips along with your checks this week. The rest of you will have to think about whether or not you can do your jobs—as I've just defined them. If you can't, I'll be happy to accept resignations. Those are the options. Think about them. And that's it for today."

The little group broke up quietly and left. Margo could imagine the whispering that would follow, the suspense about who would be fired. In fact, she planned only two cuts, an assistant and a free-lancer who had been acting as Harriett's pipeline into her department.

She wasn't particularly happy about taking away anyone's livelihood, but Mario had assured her that this kind of thing was necessary from time to time. And whatever else he was, Mario was successful. A winner. Someone to follow.

And whatever else happened, she felt she had bought herself some respect. If a little fear was the way to do it, well, then, that was the way it would have to be.

## Chapter 33

As they walked through the airport terminal, Kate and Greg started to look around for the "someone" who was supposed to meet them. He had been uncharacteristically quiet during the long flight, and Kate had had a moment of worry that he wasn't feeling well. But when she had asked him if he was all right, he had nodded, without offering any other explanation for his mood. She had put her concern aside, and now they were both primed and up for the promotional campaign that was being handled by Baldwin and Carr, a high-powered public relations firm that had offices in New York and Los Angeles. Their client list included dozens of well-known actors, superstar athletes and best-selling authors, as well as a number of corporate types who liked to see their names in print.

Greg spotted a young woman, tall, slender, with golden skin and long golden hair, holding up a cardboard sign that said HARDY AND SHERWOOD. "Hey," Greg said, "that's us." He took Kate's elbow and propelled her toward the terminal doors.

"Hello, there," the young woman said, in an accent that was decidedly British. "I'm Sondra Leeds, from Baldwin and Carr. I have a car outside. Why don't you collect your luggage and meet me back here?"

"Thanks," Greg said, training the little smile that was Kate's favorite in Sondra Leeds's direction. "Baldwin and Carr certainly seem to be an efficient bunch."

Sondra laughed and squeezed Greg's arm. "My dear, you haven't seen anything yet. We have to be. We handle a *very* select clientele. They expect a great deal more than efficiency. And we do aim to please." Sondra flashed her own toothsome

smile at Greg, and Kate suddenly wished that their PR representative had been a man.

"Well," Kate said, as she and Greg walked back to the baggage area, "we certainly do seem to be getting VIP treatment. I wonder if I'm going to like it."

"Sure, you will," Greg said confidently, giving her nose an affectionate tweak. "Stick with me, kid, and you'll have VIP treatment all the time, morning, noon and night."

He's certainly a lot more cheerful than he was on the plane, Kate thought. I wonder if it has to do with the blond Brit waiting outside.

While the limousine driver loaded the luggage into the trunk, Sondra positioned herself between Greg and Kate. "Welcome to California," she said brightly, her eyes including Kate for just a moment before they turned to Greg. "And by the way, I must say that you're much better-looking than your jacket photo. You should do very well on television here. The ladies will just love you. And they're the ones who buy the books, you know."

Kate watched Greg flush with pleasure. Oh, boy, she thought, she's so obvious—and he's so easy. She pushed the thought away. Greg was attractive. And Sondra Leeds was certainly entitled to make a pass if she felt like it. And jealousy was dumb anyway. Her experience with Harry had made her a little fatalistic. If a man liked you, he liked you. And if he liked someone better, there was nothing to be done. Right. She leaned back into the car upholstery and let Sondra give Greg her undivided attention. Ostensibly the woman was giving him a rundown on their schedule for the coming days. But Kate knew, from the sound of her voice, that Sondra's eyes—and hormones—were working in high gear.

As the car swung onto Sunset Boulevard, Sondra explained that she had booked them into the Bel-Air Sands. "It's a small place," she explained, "very quiet, very good service. Not all the Hollywood razzmatazz that you find at the Beverly Hills, not as formal as the Wilshire. I thought you'd enjoy relaxing in between interviews. The rooms are very pleasant, the food's quite good, and there's a nice pool that's almost never crowded."

Kate and Greg murmured their approval of the airy, garden-like atmosphere of the plant-filled lobby. Kate felt her sense of anticipation revive, until Sondra handed them their room keys.

"I booked you two rooms," she explained, a question in her voice. "I assumed that's what you wanted." Kate was glad of the space and the privacy, until she realized that her room and Greg's were in opposite wings. She waited for Greg to protest. When he didn't, she took the offending key, mumbled something about getting some rest and went to find her room and wait for her luggage. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sondra walking Greg in the direction of the bar.

Her room was pleasant enough, as Sondra had promised. It was spacious and well-furnished, decorated in the same green, white and yellow garden-colors of the lobby. There was an adequately stocked kitchenette and a small patio outside the sliding glass doors. Someone—Baldwin and Carr, she supposed—had sent flowers and a basket of fruit. Everything she needed. Sort of.

Separate rooms weren't so bad, she told herself. A place to relax and unwind after what would certainly be some hectic and pressure-filled days. Hadn't she told Greg that they should hold off on any full-time togetherness until the tour was over? But she was a little angry and resentful that Sondra had made the choice for them. And that Greg didn't seem to mind.

She turned down the flowered spread on one of the beds, stretched out and closed her eyes. She had just begun to relax, to feel the fatigue leave her body, when she heard a tap on the door.

She rubbed her eyes and opened the door, admitting Greg without a word of greeting. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Everything's fine. The room's lovely. And I think I'll take a short swim before dinner."

"I didn't mean the room," he said, with what seemed to be genuine concern. "I mean—are you okay? You left so abruptly. Sondra noticed it, too."

I'll bet she did, Kate thought. "I didn't mean to be abrupt," she said. "I just wanted to rest for a minute," she lied. "I thought the two of you could talk over whatever she has lined up for us."

"Oh, sure," he said, looking relieved—and perhaps a little guilty. "Well, we're free tonight, you know. Sondra offered to take us out to dinner. I told her I'd ask you."

"Doesn't matter to me," she lied again, not at all interested in making a threesome with Sondra Leeds.

"Okay, then, let's do it," he said quickly, making her think that he had decided before he'd asked her. "Eight o'clock?"

Now she was certain he had already made the date.

"Fine," she said, lying to Greg for the third time in a few short minutes.

For their first evening in Los Angeles, Sondra had booked a table at The Bistro. As she sipped her white wine, Kate thought this was clearly going to be Sondra's evening from start to finish. The young Englishwoman was wearing a California confection in gold and white silk, a daringly cut dress with spaghetti straps and a bodice that very neatly showcased a pair of perfectly formed breasts.

"I have you booked on the Robin O'Hara show tomorrow morning," she was saying. "I'll have the car pick you up two hours before air time. We'll have a little conference before you tape. I want you to be fresh and spontaneous, but not unprepared. I'll tell you a little about O'Hara now. Her show doesn't air in New York, but she sells a lot of books in this part of the country. First, you should know that she likes men a lot better than she likes women."

She's not the only one, Kate thought.

"Second, you'd never guess it to look at her, but she is one smart cookie. So don't talk down to her. In fact, don't underestimate her in any way. I've seen Robin make mincemeat out of experts—especially those who treated her like she was a bit fluffy in the head."

Greg was all attention. Kate yawned. Sondra glanced in her direction and went on talking, her accent becoming even more British. "You'll do very well, Greg," she said, with an emphasis on the *you*. "Robin will like you. I know she's read your book. She told me how impressed she was with your ideas, with the natural and unstuffy way they're presented. If you play your cards right, she'll tell you that on the air."

"Actually," Greg said, "the *natural and unstuffy* part is Kate's doing. I'm afraid I write like most people in my field—too many words and too little warmth."

"Well, then," Sondra went on smoothly, as if he had not mentioned Kate, "she'll want to talk about the feminist angle, too. I think you'll do well with that subject. O'Hara hates what she calls professional feminists, but she likes what you say . . ."

Not once did Sondra look in Kate's direction. Not until dessert, while they were all exclaiming over the chocolate soufflé, spooning voluptuously into the chilled cream that ran through its warm nooks and crannies. "Goodness," she said.

"I'd love to spend more time with you, too, but I'm afraid I'll have to eat and run. The bill's taken care of, so if you'd like to linger, feel free to have a second cup of coffee. Be sure to get enough sleep. And, Kate," she said, finally addressing a remark to her, "use a little coverup on the circles under your eyes. They're *so* aging—and this is L.A., you know."

Kate opened her mouth—then decided to say nothing. Women like Sondra simply weren't worth the effort. She smiled sweetly and thought that if there was an afterlife, a woman like Sondra should end up in a special purgatory: a giant singles bar where no one paid any attention to her at all.

"Gosh, it is getting late," Greg said, after they had ordered more coffee. "I was having such a good time, I didn't notice."

"Mmm."

"If this meal is a sample, I think L.A. is going to be fun, don't you?"

"Mmm."

"Are you tired, Kate? I notice you didn't say much during dinner."

"Mmm. I was just soaking up all this delightful Los Angeles fun. Can you call a taxi for us, Greg? I don't think I want to linger after all."

"Well, okay, if that's what you want."

"Why don't we say good night right here," she said, as they picked up their keys from the front desk. "We have to get an early start, and there's no sense your taking that long walk to my room."

He looked at her quizzically. "You don't want me to stay with you tonight?"

She shook her head, though there was nothing she wanted more than to spend the night in Greg's arms, to hold him close and hear the words that would take away the pangs of jealousy that had been gnawing away at her almost since they'd arrived, that would break down the wall of tension that stood between them at this very moment. "We're both tired," she said evenly. "We don't want to show up looking old and haggard for Robin O'Hara. We'll do better if we get a good night's rest."

"Fine," he said slowly, "if we're really talking about rest. But you've been a little off-center ever since we got here, Kate. I think we should talk—if there's anything we need to talk about. Is there?"

She shook her head again and tried not to notice the hurt

look on Greg's face as he said good night and turned to walk down the long corridor that led to his room.

I don't know why I did that, she said to herself as she peeled off her clothes and slid between the cool sheets. I have been off-center since we got here. Jealous and insecure and hurt. How can I tell him that, she thought, remembering words Harry once said to her. "Where's your pride, Kate?" he had asked.

She had reclaimed her pride since that miserable day. And she had kept it tonight, but pride wasn't a very warm companion, here in this large and lonely bed.

"Be careful. And don't underestimate her." Those were Sondra's last instructions to Greg and Kate, after her repeated reminders to "smile—and try to look relaxed." Robin O'Hara had one of the West Coast's most popular interview shows. In her territory, she was as popular as Johnny, Merv and Phil. She was a guaranteed seller of books, a sure-fire promoter of personalities—and she knew it.

Her own story was something of a phenomenon. Robin O'Hara had no formal journalistic or media training, yet she created some of the most sparkling, controversial shows on the air. On Robin's program, there was always a sense of *who knows what might happen?* in the air. Viewers were drawn by the possibility that they might, at any moment, see something naked and real.

Robin had no problem finding guests for her show. They knew that even if she made fools of them, the appearance would boost their ratings, their sales or their recognizability. One disgruntled actor, a leading man with a macho screen image who had been led past polite chitchat into a discussion of his homosexual past, said of her: "Robin O'Hara has the style of a cobra and the instincts of a mongoose. As for ethics, she has none." The remark had been widely circulated, and Robin's ratings had soared.

Kate had mixed feelings about O'Hara. She deplored her techniques, but she was fascinated by the results. There was no doubt that her interviews were interesting—often in a sleazy, sensationalistic way—but interesting, nevertheless. In her own work, Kate had had more than one experience when she knew she was on the verge of extracting juicy material from a subject, something that would raise an interview above the commonplace. Yet inevitably she held back, feeling it wasn't nice to take advantage of another human being.

Other talk-show hosts often introduced themselves to their guests before the show. O'Hara did not. Kate reckoned it was easier to toy with unknown strangers than to deal with people who were human and real to her. O'Hara did not appear on the set until a few minutes before show time, allowing her guests to sit in the hot seat, waiting, building up a good solid case of nerves, until they were putty in her hands.

Still, Kate reassured herself, there were two of them. And Greg was an experienced psychiatrist and therapist. He was used to handling direct attacks. He could pull them out of any tough spots.

When Robin finally appeared, Kate was impressed. She was a very attractive—even beautiful—woman, with long honey-colored hair and a figure that would stop traffic. She was dressed in a clinging knit dress that was a far cry from the professional-woman look favored by most female broadcasters. Robin O'Hara did not want to be taken seriously. She looked soft, feminine, sexy—the better to soften up her guests, lull them into a sense of comfort and ease—no matter what they had heard about her.

As the director started the countdown, "Twenty seconds," Robin curved her full coral lips into a smile and ran her tongue over their already shiny surface. She did not look at either Kate or Greg until the very moment they were on the air. As the announcer finished his introduction, she crossed her long slender legs and began in a low breathy voice: "From Sigmund Freud to Woody Allen, experts have pondered the eternal question: What do women want? Today's guests, Dr. Greg Hardy and columnist Kate Sherwood, have written a best-seller that explores this very provocative theme.

"Dr. Hardy," she said, turning her hazel eyes in his direction, "what *do* women want?" She made the question seductive, suggesting that the two of them were alone in her bedroom. The cameraman followed her lead with a tight closeup of her face, showing her eager shining eyes, her parted lips. As Kate glanced at the image on the nearest monitor, it looked as if Robin were about to lean over and kiss Greg.

Clearly Greg hadn't expected this kind of opening. He had prepared some preliminary remarks about how the project had been conceived, how he had collected his data. Now his own eyes opened wide for a moment, before the professional in him took over. He cleared his throat to steal a moment of thinking time. Then he smiled his little-boy smile, the very one that

always turned Kate's heart to mush. "That's not a question I can give a quick answer to," he said.

Robin leaned closer, allowing the neckline of her dress to shift, exposing a heady suggestion of creamy bosom. "Try," she whispered huskily.

Greg smiled again, looking less professional and more like a star-struck teenager. "Okay. I think it's safe to say that we've learned that women's wants are not so different from men's—a sense of self-worth, a sense of personal security, meaningful work and, of course—love."

Kate started to fidget in her seat.

"In fact," he continued, "I think this project has taught us that men and women aren't fundamentally different. Certainly we've been brought up with different perceptions of our roles in society, with differences in the way we act our roles, express our feelings and achieve our goals. But our basic needs are the same."

Kate fidgeted some more, creating an audible creak when she tilted her chair.

"I feel," Greg was saying, "that we're all on our way to a better, fuller, richer standard of male-female relationships as we achieve a better understanding of these different perceptions..."

"Thank you for that very incisive diagnosis," O'Hara said, dismissing Greg sweetly but decisively. She swiveled her chair abruptly, making in that second a quick transition in her appearance. The sex kitten was gone, in her place, an attractive, alert, intelligent-looking woman. "I think your co-author may have a different diagnosis. Miz Sherwood, what did you learn from your work on what women want?"

Kate was dazzled by the shift in O'Hara's tactics. God, she thought, that woman must have radar in the back of her head. "Well," she said, slowly, choosing her words carefully, "I don't take issue with what Greg—Dr. Hardy—has said. If there is a difference, it's a matter of emphasis. Dr. Hardy has been talking about better relationships through understanding. That's true in a general way. But I believe that from a woman's point of view, there's a fundamental problem that has nothing to do with intellectual understanding. I think women have always been the weaker sex because of their emotional programming, what Dr. Hardy has described as different perceptions. It's what causes their sense of incompleteness when they're manless, their gut feeling that the men in their lives are at the center of

it all. That everything else—work, friends, sometimes even children—is secondary. For a man, the right woman is one facet of a satisfying life. Not the core of it.”

“In other words,” O’Hara said, “you’re saying that women see men as meat and potatoes—while men see women as desert.”

Kate laughed. “Something like that. Of course, we’re only talking generalities, and there have always been exceptions . . .”

“You’re saying that as long as women feel that way, men hold the whip hand? Emotionally speaking?”

“Yes, I guess I’d say that, too. Mind you, there’s nothing new in what I’ve said. It’s just that with all the changes in social attitudes and all the feminist activism, we forget that you can’t legislate the emotional condition.”

“So—back to our original question—would you say that women would like to feel the way men do? That the opposite sex is important, but not all that important?”

“Maybe, for a while, it might be a healthy change if women had the ability to compartmentalize. If they could get past that obsessive preoccupation with the men they love.”

Robin chuckled. It was a delightful full-bodied sound. “Kate, dear, you don’t mind if I call you Kate? You make being in love sound like a social disease.”

Now Kate chuckled. “For this time in history, maybe it is. Women are daring more, trying more—but their emotional machinery belongs back in the Tin Lizzie days. Their own feelings cripple them when they try to have a full life outside a love relationship.”

“You’re saying that the way women’s feelings work, they can’t walk and chew gum at the same time.”

The two women laughed together. Kate was amazed at Robin’s flair for quick, punchy distillation. “Yes,” she said, “men’s attitudes are much more functional. They can do whatever they need to do to become whole persons. I think that’s why some ambitious women choose men who are weak, men who are accommodating, men they can dominate—in a sense, men who are like traditional women.”

“Now that’s interesting, Kate. It sounds like Professor Higgins saying: ‘Why can’t a woman be more like a man?’”

Before Kate could answer, Robin swiveled around and made yet another transformation, this time to the girl-next-door, warm, concerned and just a little curious. “Well, Dr. Hardy—Greg—I can see that this must have been an interesting, dynamic

collaboration. Your co-author seems to have ideas of her own. Tell me—I hear that in the course of this project, the two of you were, shall we say, more than friends. Did your differences create any problems—professional or personal?”

Kate could see Greg weighing the question. He knew, she could see, that Robin was leading him into tricky territory, offering him a choice between a sexist stance and one of those too-good-to-be-true positions.

“You’re very perceptive, Miss O’Hara,” he said. “I think Kate and I had, as you say, a dynamic collaboration because she didn’t rubber-stamp my thinking. I valued our differences because they helped us to refine and discuss our material much more effectively. And,” he added, flashing that winsome smile again, “Kate’s contribution was often infinitely more valuable than my own professional training when it came to humanizing our data.”

“And what was that?”

“A woman’s sensibility.” Kate thought he sounded a shade too pat, too patronizing, and perhaps he did, too, because he quickly retrieved the moment. “I wish I had it,” he said humbly. “Because, you see, this male capacity for detachment, for compartmentalization, that Kate has mentioned—it may be true, but it comes at a price. Women have always been closer to certain fundamental realities. They are more in touch with their feelings, much more sensitive, more able to experience love in its fullest. . .”

Bullshit, Kate thought, and for one awful moment, she was afraid she had said the word out loud. Apparently she had not, but with the same uncanny instinct she had demonstrated before, Robin turned back to Kate. “What do you say, Kate? Greg wishes he had your sensibility. Would you trade it for the ability to detach?”

Kate looked directly at Greg. “For a while, yes. Because all this sensitivity has a price, too. There are more women in mental hospitals, at psychiatric clinics, more women being chewed up every day by this ‘love at its fullest.’ I’m sure Greg would agree that everything has a price. I just think it would be nice to experience a different perspective for a change.”

O’Hara dimpled mischievously. “Walk in the enemy’s shoes, you mean?”

Kate blushed. “I didn’t say the enemy. . .”

“But you sounded as if you meant that—’fess up, Kate.”

Kate tried to look squarely at the interviewer. “I don’t think

of men as the enemy. I understand that it takes two to create a victim in any situation. But sometimes, yes, when I feel angry or frustrated because I don't think I'll live long enough to see changes that matter, then maybe I do get combative."

"Well," O'Hara said, breathing a world of meaning into the single word. "On that note, we'll have to say good-bye to our guests, Greg Hardy and Kate Sherwood, authors of the best-selling *What Women Really Want*." Here she performed the obligatory display of the book. "This is a fascinating book. And after meeting you two, I can see you must have had a marvelous time writing it. I hope you'll come again."

The director cut to a commercial, and Robin got up and walked away without another word, like a surgeon who has just finished an operation.

Kate and Greg looked at one another. Neither of them said anything. Kate could see the tightness around her lover's mouth, the tense set of his head and neck. He's really mad at me, she thought. I talked too much. And I disagreed with him. On the air. In front of all those people. Well, so what, she decided, swinging from apprehension to defiance. He's such a smooth talker, such a defender of women's rights. Let's see if he really means it.

Sondra Leeds was waiting for them. Uh-oh, Kate thought, if there's one thing we don't need now, it's this one. "Not bad," Sondra said brightly. "Not at all bad. I think we'll sell quite a few books with this show. But," she said, turning to Greg, "I think in future it would be better if you two coordinated your public image a bit better. After all," she smiled at him, "you are supposed to be the expert on this team. I'm afraid," she added, not without malice, "that Kate came out much the stronger personality this time out. Try not to let that happen again," she finished sweetly, and then left.

As they left the studio, Kate found it difficult to remember exactly what she'd said on Robin's show. Television experiences still intimidated her, and her usual way of coping was to go into a semi-trance condition. Each time she saw a tape of a show, she was invariably surprised—as if she'd never heard any of the things she had said.

Although Sondra's remarks made her even more concerned about what Greg might be feeling, she heaved a sigh of relief as she slumped into the back seat of the waiting limousine. She was glad that all they had scheduled for the afternoon were two press interviews. There was no need to look and sound

perfect for print. There was time to think, time to think twice if it was necessary.

"Pleased with yourself, are you?" Greg's voice brought her back to the present. Something in his tone made her open her eyes. His face was still set, still unsmiling.

"Just glad it's over, that's all," she answered cautiously.

"That's funny—I could have sworn you were enjoying yourself." His voice was hard, edged with controlled anger.

"I wouldn't say that. It was just something we had to do."

"Really? It seemed to me that you were taking great pleasure in trying to make a fool of me."

Now she sat up straight. "What are you talking about, Greg? Making a fool of you? How, for heaven's sake?"

"Taking issue with everything I said. Biting every time that woman threw you a lead. Letting her stir up something that almost looked like a quarrel."

"Is that what you think I was doing? You certainly seemed to enjoy 'that woman' yourself—at least while she was simpering at you. Is that it, Greg?" She heard her own voice getting shrill and she couldn't seem to stop it. "Are you only comfortable when a woman's batting her eyes at you?"

"That's a rotten thing to say." Now Greg's voice was rising, too. "Especially to me. I've always cared about women. I've always supported..."

"Sure. As a cause." She was too keyed up now to be careful of Greg's vulnerabilities. "Causes are manageable. Causes don't get uppity and talk back. And what I said is no more rotten than what you just said to me. You say you respect my opinions, but what you really want is for me to rubber-stamp yours."

"I didn't say that."

"You just did. You think I deliberately set out to make you look bad."

"Well, didn't you?"

"I'm not even going to answer that. You know perfectly well I don't agree with everything you say. I think some of your ideas are simplistic and that you can afford to have them because you're a man."

"I never realized you felt this way," he said, his tone suggesting that he had just begun to suspect her of all kinds of treachery.

They rode back to the hotel in silence. When they picked up their keys, they found identical messages from Sondra,

instructing them to meet the interviewer from *The Los Angeles Times* in the lobby at two o'clock.

"I'll see you here in a couple of hours then," Greg said stiffly, and she knew that he was still brooding over what he saw as her betrayal.

"Look, Greg," she said, trying to sound reasonable, rather than apologetic. "Maybe we'd better sit down together and have a sandwich before we do any more interviews. If you feel that the program didn't go well, maybe we'd better see what we can do about it. We can't just do the newspaper piece cold, like this. The interviewer's going to pick up the vibes, which might sell books. But it won't do us any good."

They chose a quiet outside table, set back from the pool, and ordered lunch. "So," he said, "what's your battle plan?"

"I don't have a plan. I just wanted to clear the air. If it's going to make this easier, maybe we can just agree not to disagree. I can certainly keep my mouth shut if I plan to do that ahead of time. There's certainly enough we do agree on; we can present a united front if you like."

He looked at her, as if he were seeing her for the first time. "Do you know how patronizing you sound right now? I can see the kid gloves clear across the table. And any interviewer with half a brain will see it, too. Are those the only alternatives you know, Kate? To treat a man as some sort of dangerous alien? Or like a not-very-bright child?"

She started to make a heated denial, then stopped. "You're exaggerating. But maybe you're right."

He waited for her to say something more, but she seemed to be preoccupied with her own thoughts. "I can deal with disagreement," he said. "What the hell kind of professional would I be if I couldn't? If you've ever felt the need to humor me, then that's your problem, Kate, not mine. For God's sake, Kate, that's how good ideas get born. Little irritations aren't the worst thing in the world."

"Fine. Suppose you tell me how we behave in the next few hours."

"We behave like two separate people who have separate individual thoughts and feelings. Two people who work together and respect those differences."

"Wait a minute. How is that different from what just happened, before you bit my head off?"

"It isn't so different. Except now I know how you feel. You

took me off balance—and I can't help wondering what happened. Why you chose this particular time to spring some of your private thoughts on me."

"I don't know. It just happened."

"Did it, Kate? Just happen?"

"Oh, don't be such a shrink," she snapped, feeling he was getting close to something she didn't want to think about, much less say.

"There's not much I can do about that," he said quietly, and from the look on his face, she could see that she'd hurt him. "It's what I am. I thought you liked it. Like I thought you liked me."

"I'm sorry, Greg. I didn't mean that. I guess we've just opened up a can of worms. Maybe we should just leave it alone for now."

He nodded. She wondered if something had just happened between them, something that maybe couldn't be fixed. Not for the first time, she thought how complicated life had become since she'd divorced Harry.

The interview went smoothly. And if the interviewer noticed that his subjects were a little subdued, no mention was made of that in the largely favorable article that followed. Although they had agreed to disagree, both Kate and Greg took great care to be conciliatory, to point out the virtues of the other's thinking and to emphasize their similarities rather than their differences.

When the work day was finished, Greg asked her offhandedly: "Sondra's called and invited us to dinner again. I've already accepted. I told her I'd mention it to you. Want to come?"

She shook her head. The last thing she wanted to do was to leave Greg in the hands of Sondra Leeds. Sondra would be only too glad, she supposed, to stroke and soothe Greg's ego, not to mention Greg himself. But Kate felt she couldn't sit through an evening fraught with undertones. Not now, while things were so crummy. "I think I'll pass," she said. "I'm really very tired. I'll just order in from room service."

"Suit yourself," he said, in a voice that made her feel it didn't matter at all.

She ate a solitary meal on the patio, hoping to enjoy the soothing effect of the warm breezes. She listened to the sounds of people going out for the evening, and she could feel the

beginning of a full-blown case of the blues. She pulled a pile of reader letters from her briefcase. Other people's problems.

The first was from a woman who loved a homosexual and wanted Kate to encourage her earnest belief that she could "convert" him. Kate shook her head and put the letter aside. The next was from a woman who was angry because her husband wouldn't battle his domineering mother on her behalf. Kate tackled that one, then moved onto a young office worker who was being sexually harassed and a teenager who thought she was in love with a married man who sounded like a grade-A bastard.

Somehow the hours after dinner passed. Kate put her dinner tray outside her door. She snuggled under the covers of her bed and slowly drifted off to sleep. She woke up two or three times, thinking she heard a knock on her door. Twice she got up and checked but found only an empty corridor. Wishful thinking, she said to herself as she closed her eyes again and wished for sleep.

She was awakened by the bedside telephone. "Good morning, sleepyhead." It was Sondra Leeds, sounding unmercifully cheerful and suspiciously smug. "I'm so-o-o sorry to disturb your beauty rest, but we do have to be on our way in an hour."

"On our way," Kate repeated blankly. "Where?"

"To the book-signing, silly. Greg and I are having breakfast, but you can take your time. We'll meet you in the lobby."

"Okay," she agreed. What the hell was that *Greg and I* business? And breakfast where? she wondered. In Greg's room? Did that mean Sondra had spent the night there? This dream trip to Los Angeles was certainly not going according to plan. Not hers, anyway.

She dressed carefully. Miss Los Angeles was sure to be looking good. That golden tan, those white teeth and muscular limbs. Sondra Leeds was probably a jogger. She probably ate disgusting things like wheat germ and tofu and yogurt popsicles. Stop it, she commanded herself. If Greg preferred Sondra Leeds—well, that was his problem. She looked at herself in the mirror and rejected the beige linen suit. She rifled through her clothes and decided on army fatigues, the kind Ellen liked to wear. Aggressively New York, that's what she would be. Take it or leave it, Los Angeles. And Greg Hardy.

Sondra and Greg were head to head in conversation, sharing a couch and goodness-knows-what-else. Kate stuck a smile on

her face and walked confidently toward them. "Good morning," she said, trying to sound carefree and breezy. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting. If I had known..."

"My fault entirely," Sondra interrupted. "I should have left a note for you. But I did tell Greg, and I assumed he would mention it to you."

"Slipped my mind," he mumbled, looking guilty as hell.

"No problem," she said, wondering how long she could carry off this good-sport position.

Somehow she got through the book-signing and everything else that Sondra had arranged. And with each hour she spent in Sondra and Greg's company, the good sport shriveled away, eaten up by the silent rage that was building inside her.

How dare he, she fumed. How dare he humiliate her in this way. Ignore her. Enjoy the obvious attentions of a... of a twinkie, for God's sake. After all that feminist sweet talk. It felt like the whole rotten business with Harry, all over again. Now she was a woman who "did something." And now Greg seemed to be preferring something else.

When the working part of the day was finally over, she curtly refused Greg's offer of dinner and went directly to her room. She ordered room service, with a full bottle of wine. She picked at the food and downed two glasses of wine. She felt restless, jumpy. She dug out her pile of reader letters and leafed through them. Depressingly enough, most of them had to do with men. She picked out one, from a lonely teenager. It ended: "Where can I find a boyfriend?" Kate slid a sheet of paper into her portable and typed out: "Look under the nearest rock."

She took another letter, from a married woman who asked, "How can I keep my husband from looking at other women?"

"Chain him to the nearest piece of furniture and keep your door locked."

She poured herself another glass of wine, then read a complaint about a troublesome mother-in-law. "Tell the bitch to butt out," she typed. Warming to this exercise, she went on drinking, pouring out her frustration onto the page in her typewriter. It was all so silly, she thought. There wasn't a single earth-shattering problem in the lot. Just stupid mistakes by stupid people who couldn't get along with other stupid people. Just like me, she thought, as she finished the wine.

After Los Angeles, Kate felt a growing tension in the time she spent with Greg. They had so looked forward to the trip. It was to be almost a kind of honeymoon. And it had been a dismal failure. Just like so many honeymoons. When it was over, they were more stiff, more separate from one another than when they started.

There was no question that something had happened. But Kate had no idea what that something was. They had built an entire relationship from their collaboration. And now they were supposed to be enjoying the success of that collaboration, as a couple, of sorts. But that didn't seem to be happening.

Was Greg still the same as he had been with Nancy, insecure enough to be threatened by any show of independence? And what had happened to all of her newfound confidence when Greg looked at another woman? She had been jealous as she had never been jealous before, savagely, ferociously threatened and angry in a way that couldn't be overcome with common sense and reason.

Now there seemed to be a wall of unspoken between them. They talked, they made love—in fact, her desire for Greg seemed stronger than ever, now that he had once again moved out of reach. But he no longer mentioned the possibility of living together.

She found herself in a place where she didn't know what to do or say, and so she did nothing. Just as she had done nothing with Harry.

This is different, she told herself. You and Greg have a relationship; neither of you is seeing anyone else. It matters to both of you. Try to relax, take it one day at a time. Hadn't she given that advice to someone? To several someones?

So she tried to make the time they spent together as pleasant as possible, one day at a time, without thinking about whether or not they had a lot of tomorrows ahead. Without probing into what might have gone wrong between them.

Her shaky equilibrium dissolved on a Saturday night, after she and Greg had gone to see a new movie, a historical epic about a stormy love affair between an early feminist and a political radical. Greg seemed to enjoy the picture, but there was something in the story that stirred up something negative in her. Frustration, impatience, anger.

They went back to her apartment to share some pizza and red wine that they picked up on the way. She ate in silence, while Greg raved on about the picture and the strength of a

relationship that could endure as the one on-screen had.

Finally he noticed that she wasn't saying anything. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Didn't you like it?"

"I did. But there was something in the story that got to me. The woman. She was so strong, so free, until she fell in love. Then she kept trying to be what her lover wanted her to be. And the only way she could be herself was to stay away from him. It made sense to me because it seemed to be the way things are. And that depresses me."

"Don't you think you're overreacting?"

"No. No, I'm not. Why do you think so many ambitious, smart women choose weak men, men who don't give them problems?"

Greg looked bemused. "I don't know about other men or other women. I've always been attracted to capable, intelligent women."

"That's because you only know how to visit," she said a little contemptuously, before she could stop herself. "And I wish you wouldn't be so smug. You remind me of so many people who say all the right words, but that doesn't mean beans in real life. I can say I can do this or that—as long as no one ever calls me on it. As long as I make sure I never have to put up or shut up."

He stared at her, as if she had suddenly grown horns and a tail. "You know, Kate, you make me so mad sometimes—I feel like punching you."

She was startled, but recovered quickly, with the sarcasm that was becoming a characteristic of her conversations with Greg. "You sure know how to sweet-talk a girl, Dr. Hardy."

"Stop that," he commanded, gripping her forearm until it hurt. "I want you to listen now. Because you've been having an effect on me that isn't so good. And I don't like it. I thought I was a man who liked women. I never wanted anyone to 'yes' me all the time. I like a woman who has her own thoughts. It was like that when we started seeing each other. But now—you provoke me so, Kate—you incite me to . . . I don't know what. It's almost as if I want to hurt you, to see you cry. I want to know I can have that effect on you. Goddammit, I want to know that I can touch you when we're not in bed."

As if on cue, her eyes filled with tears. She was frightened by Greg's anger. "You can hurt me," she said shakily. "You do."

"Then why don't you ever let me know?" he demanded,

still angry. "Why do you have to pretend you don't care?"

She looked down, staring at the red mark Greg's fingers had left on her arm. "Because I'm afraid," she said, her voice barely audible. "I'm afraid that if I let a man know he matters, if I let him matter so much that I couldn't walk away, I'd be right back where I was with Harry. I can't do that again. Not even for you . . ."

"I give up," he said in disgust. "I give up. If you can still think I'm anything like Harry, I don't know what else I can do to prove you're wrong." He got up from the table and walked to the door. He looked at her for a moment, and then he came back.

"Look," he said, straining for patience and composure. "Maybe I'm not as confident as I'd like to be. Maybe there's something about your—your posture that threatens me sometimes. Maybe it's all those defenses you keep hiding behind. I start to feel as frustrated as I did with Nancy. I thought after we got to know each other, you would let go a little . . . trust me . . . trust us. But I still don't feel I have you. Not completely."

"Maybe you don't," she said a little defiantly. "I don't know if I want to change myself so you can feel more secure. If there's so much about me that bothers you, maybe you should do what Harry did. Find someone who fits your blueprint."

He shook his head, reached out his hand as if to touch her, then pulled back. "If that's a serious suggestion on your part," he said evenly, "then maybe I'll take it. Especially if that's the best you can come up with." He got up and left without looking back.

She sat for a time in the silence he had left behind. It was almost as if she had expected it, as if all the time they'd been together was a lie, as if this was the ultimate truth. That there was no constancy, no strength in the love between a man and a woman, especially if you didn't play their games, their way. She almost felt a perverse sense of pleasure. Greg had proved she was right. She didn't need him. She would be fine. She would show him. More important—she would show herself. She would not call him, and she would not apologize. She was right.

She felt dislocated, like the lone survivor of some unspeakable disaster. It was as if Greg had taken with him something that made her feel, once again, incomplete.

She was not in pain, not like when Harry defected. That happens only once, someone had told her. It was like an immunization that took. Having it happen once made you know that there was no angel on your shoulder to protect you or even to warn you when disaster approached.

Once a victim of her own broken hopes, once a survivor of her own curdled expectations, she was now in familiar territory, the realm of the disconnected and the restless, filled with a charged anxiety that was the flip side of listless depression.

She felt that she had to do something for herself, something that might give her an antidote for this feeling of frustrated impotence, this sense that no matter what she did, she was not really in full control of her life.

She walked to her desk and fingered some of the notes they had prepared together, as if they might have some healing power. She sat for a while, then without quite knowing where she was going, found herself out on the street, walking to the park, to the bench where they had sat, held hands and laughed like children at the absurdities of their own situation, confident, then, that some sense might be made of them.

She closed her eyes, immersed herself for a moment in her own deepest longings, the treacherous needs that had brought her such intense, yet such tentative moments of happiness. It was as if she were visiting a church, a shrine, silent, quiet, still, except for her own restless heart. It was a moment when there was no rational solution to seek, a moment to surrender to those primitive emotions Greg had talked about so eloquently. And she had listened, wanting to believe that he could teach her how to love for keeps.

Later that evening, as she went to bed, she lit the candle on her night table. It was a scented candle, a fat rich cylinder of perfumed wax, redolent with suggestions and possibilities. In the first flushes of mutual discovery, the candle had seemed like a subliminal aphrodisiac, part of the stage setting of their atmosphere for love. But as their individual quirks, their fears and insecurities surfaced, as the bed they shared from time to time became a kind of emotional minefield, the dwindling chunk of wax seemed like a votive candle, lit with her fervent prayer that everything would miraculously be all right. Just this once.

## Chapter 34

ELLEN let herself into the empty apartment. She was dead tired. Since morning she had run through one coaching session and two auditions, one for an off-Broadway show and one for a floor-wax commercial. She wasn't feeling very good about either one, though the producer of the show had asked her for a date.

When she was like this, tired and underemployed, the self-doubt grew. Had she broken up her marriage for an empty dream? Was she one of those people who would remain always on the fringes of the world they hungered for?

Mechanically she called her service to check for messages. At the top of the list were two calls from Rod Chapman. The woman from the answering service dropped her usual anonymous telephone voice and fairly purred as she spoke Rod's name: "Mr. Chapman, from Hollywood." Ellen smiled. Rod Chapman had that effect on women, both on-screen and off. The woman was no doubt wondering why a reigning prince of the box-office and two-time Oscar nominee had called little Ellen Hirschorn.

Ellen suspected she knew. Rod probably had some work for her, perhaps as dialogue coach on a new picture. He was always reaching out to her, with work, with leads for work, with phone calls just to ask how she was.

She and Rod had met so many years ago. He had just been starting out in the business and she had been so very young. He'd had a small but flashy part in a hit Broadway show, and she had waited at the stage door to tell him how wonderful he was. A real fan she had been—a regular groupie, and Rod had smiled at her, touched and amused by her youthful eagerness and adoration. He had taken her to dinner that night, and she

had spent the night in his bed. She had fallen in love with him then and she had never stopped loving him.

In spite of the difference in their ages, something special had been born that night, something that had grown and flourished over the years. There had been a sense of communion, of which making love had only been a part. Between them there was a feeling that they knew things about one another, a feeling that their lives would somehow always be intertwined, even years later, when there were thousands of miles and two spouses between them.

She had never discussed her love for Rod with anyone. She felt that would diminish what they had, by reducing it to human proportions. She knew she would love him as long as she lived. For her, it was almost a religious commitment, irrevocable and unconditional. It did not depend on anything he said or anything he did for her. She knew his feelings were different, and that was all right, too.

She did allow herself one fantasy—that one day, his wife might somehow disappear, that somehow they could be together. She didn't know if this would ever happen, but thinking it gave her strength and emotional nourishment.

On a reality level, he gave something else. As his career climbed, he had not forgotten Ellen. Whenever he could, he reached across the country to give her leads for work. And whenever Rod Chapman made a picture, it was understood that the dialogue coach would be Ellen Hirschorn.

At first she believed he hired her as an act of charity, and this may have been true—at first. Yet as they worked together, Ellen found she could draw out of him shadings and nuances undeveloped in the years he'd spent playing more or less the same kind of roles: virile he-men with the hearts of newborn babes.

Rod had successfully survived Hollywood by submitting cheerfully to typecasting. He had never thought of himself as an artist, and he had never gone temperamental. He had done the same thing over and over, much to the gratitude of his studios and directors. Rod was described as a "real human being" in a business where such creatures were rare, where superstars inevitably began to believe their own publicity, where constancy of any kind was rare enough to notice.

Rod's marriage had survived for more or less the same reason. He had married a woman who had no particular interest in his work, except for the benefits it provided, who was content

to make a home and travel with him when he did location work in attractive places. To Ellen, Mrs. Rod Chapman was a constant source of wonder. The woman did not seem to understand what a special man she had married, and she seemed to take him as much for granted as if he had been a balding accountant from the Bronx.

It was Rod's specialness that often made Ellen urge him to stretch professionally. "There's so much more to you," she'd said to him once, when they'd worked together on one of his many cowboy movies. "You do what you do better than anyone else. That's why you can afford to take a chance once in a while. But it wouldn't really be a chance—you can do anything, Rod. I can see it in you."

He'd smiled and said: "Still the president of my fan club, Ellen, after all these years. I'm really touched. I'd have thought after all these years you'd see what a limited and ordinary guy I am. I'm just lucky, that's all."

"Don't say that," she'd insisted fiercely. "Yes, I'll always be your fan, but I know what I'm talking about. People pay me—you do, too—for professional judgment. And that's what I'm talking about. I just want you to be everything you can be. For you. For your own satisfaction."

"I know," he'd said softly. "I know. I was just teasing. I like the way you talk to me. You talk to me straight, and I can talk that way to you. It means a lot to me. I think you're my best friend."

She'd treasured that moment, saved it with all the others, all the moments she'd lived on through so many of the years with Noah. And now she was going to see him again.

She ignored the rest of her messages and dialed Rod's private number.

"Hello?"

"Rod Chapman fan club calling," she managed, after her heart had almost leaped from her body.

"Ellen! I've been waiting for your call. You don't know how much I've needed to talk to you."

"You? Waiting by the telephone for me? I love it. Well, here I am—talk away."

"There's a new project. Something different. My agent says it's not for me. Not enough money, too much risk. But there's something about this book—I don't know—I could fall flat on my face. Ellen, I need you to see it. I could send it to you..." He hesitated.

"What? What is it? You can ask me anything—you know that."

"Could you come out here? Right away? I know I've got a nerve asking. I haven't asked if you're in the middle of something. I just want you to see it here with me—tell me if I'm getting excited over nothing."

"I'll come."

"Great! You're a lifesaver. I'll call my agent and have him book you a flight. This is on expenses, kid, so treat yourself right. I'll have a car meet you. Can you make it in a couple of days? And stay awhile if you like it?"

"Day after tomorrow?"

"That's good. I can't wait to see you again. It's been a long time."

"I know. Too long."

Ellen was one of the few people she knew who actually enjoyed coast-to-coast air travel. She watched the bad movie that was this day's fare, and she enjoyed it. As a professional, she could dissect the components of a bad film and try to figure where the screenwriter or director or actor went wrong.

It was a talent that had helped her get several jobs, fixing projects that were going badly wrong. And while she was no miracle worker, she found that she did have a gift for analysis, for conceptualizing how an idea might be brought to life. Even this, she realized, had grown and developed out of her love for Rod.

Like many actors Rod was a notoriously bad judge of material. And like many other actors he could be influenced by a fast-talking producer who would promise the moon, be swayed by a fat role that promised to be a personal tour de force or by the stature of a distinguished co-star. As a result he had, early on in his career, made some bad mistakes, worked in pictures that were doomed to fail, in spite of the fact that they had all the ingredients for potential success.

As he and Ellen began to work together on a steady basis, he had insisted on having her watch him work, whether on a set or on location, so that she might get a sense of what was happening, so that she might help him at least turn in the best performance of which he was capable.

She had learned a lot about the picture industry that way. Through Rod's intervention she had been given various kinds of work—occasional small parts in small films, consulting and

coaching jobs. And there had been her first time as assistant director on a low-budget "drive-in" movie. The credits had listed her as consultant, but she had really played a part in making a film that was not embarrassingly bad.

Rod had made all this possible. His giving had fed the fantasy that one day they might be together, working as partners, as lovers, as very good friends.

She was tremendously excited about this mysterious new project of his. She had caught his sense of excitement, and she hoped he wasn't infatuated with another potential turkey. Whatever it was, she couldn't wait to hear about it.

She was a little disappointed when she found only the car and driver, as promised, waiting for her at the airport. She had half-expected that he might surprise her and be there. But Ellen was always easy and flexible in her expectations. She rarely got more than halfway to holding onto disappointment and almost never all the way to holding a grudge.

Rod was a busy man, she reasoned. She wouldn't want him to be sitting around waiting for a flight which, after all, might have been delayed for goodness-knows-how-long.

He was however waiting at the front door of his Georgian mansion in old Bel-Air. As soon as the car passed through the security gate and came to a stop, Ellen jumped out, without waiting for the driver to perform any amenities. She ran to Rod and gave him a fierce bone-crushing hug.

"Hey, babe," he drawled. "It's great to see you."

She stepped back and looked at him. For her, Rod was basically unchanging, yet each time they were together, he always seemed to look better to her. She could always find something new and wonderful to love. He's lost some weight, she thought. I wonder if he's taking care of himself. Still, the change wasn't bad for his looks. The angles of his face seemed sharper, and the camera would certainly love them. His eyes seemed deeper, darker, full of dreams and promises.

"You look wonderful," she said.

"Thanks, babe. Come on inside. Let me show you this barn of a house. Marianne's got an army of decorators working. The first floor's a mess—I guess that's what happens when you buy a musician's house—this used to belong to Harry Higgins—the band, you know? That guy must have given some wild parties, even for this part of the world. Anyway, Marianne's trying to get the place looking decent."

"Where is Marianne?" she asked.

"She's at La Costa for the week. All this decorating is wearing her out. She says she's not coming home until the carpenters are finished."

"Oh," she said, marveling at the confidence of a woman who would leave Rod Chapman on his own, even for a week. She murmured polite sounds of admiration as he took her through the house, pointing out the massive living room furnished in antiques, the huge professional kitchen with its stainless steel appliances and the garden room with its pristine white furniture and artfully massed plants. She oohed and aahed over the enormous bathrooms, each complete with such sybaritic delights as Jacuzzis and sunlamps.

"It's wonderful," she said a little insincerely, for although Marianne's house was certainly opulent, it was not Ellen's idea of home. "I should have brought you a housewarming present."

He held her shoulders and looked down at her, from his full six-feet-two-inches. "You did," he said. "You brought me my best friend."

"Am I really?" She tingled with pleasure at the words.

"Sure—don't you know that?"

"Oh, I don't know. What about Marianne?"

"Marianne's my wife," he said simply, as if this was self-explanatory. "Here, let me show you my part of the house," he said, leading her down a flight of stairs to a cavernous wood-paneled room. "This place drives Marianne crazy. She's dying to get her hands on it and brighten it up. But I told her to just make it off-limits to company. Here's where I like to do my serious drinking and thinking."

"Are you doing a lot of that?" she asked, concerned again, for she knew that while Rod's drinking had never caused any serious personal or professional problems, it was more than she considered good for his health.

"No more than I need to," he smiled. "And take that look off your face. You know me, kid, I'm indestructible. Haven't you seen my pictures?"

"Every one. I'm president of the fan club, remember?"

"Yeah. Listen, are you tired? If you're not, I really want to talk about this project. I've been sitting on my hands waiting for you to get here."

"Let me just wash up and change. If I can get some coffee, I'll be ready to work."

"Great." He summoned the maid to show Ellen her room.

"I'll wait for you down in the dungeon," he said, and she was pleased that she and Rod would be working in his private space—and not in Marianne's house.

Upstairs she was shown to a big airy room that was all flowered wallpaper and squishy luxurious quilts. There was an old-fashioned window seat with a view of the pool and surrounding garden. After the maid left, Ellen sneaked a look around. She wanted to see where Rod and Marianne slept. The master bedroom was all traditional English, complete with a four-poster bed. Somehow she couldn't imagine Rod in that setting.

She peeled off the jumpsuit she'd traveled in and ran under a warm shower for a few muscle relaxing minutes. She towed off quickly, zipped herself into a fresh olive-drab jumpsuit and padded down the stairs barefoot.

He looked up as she made her way down the staircase to the "dungeon." "You look like a kid," he said fondly. "I think you're the most natural woman I know. On you it looks good."

She accepted the compliment with a smile. "So," she said, "I'm all yours. What do we have here?"

"What we have is this." He handed her a thick, manila-bound manuscript. "I'm not going to tell you anything else until you've read it."

"Right now?"

"Right now. Consuelo's made some coffee," he said, gesturing toward a tray on a nearby table.

"You're not going to sit here and watch me read, are you?"

"I'm going to read it again myself—plenty of copies around here. We'll talk later."

The cover on the manuscript read: *Nice Guy*, by Arthur Randall Holmes. She began to read. It was the story of a major film star, a character much like the parts Rod played on screen: tough, warm, lovable, and altogether good. But only on screen. The script's nice guy was in real life a kind of savage parody of himself, twisted, impotent, almost inhuman. And while the Holmes screenplay made the man far from likable, the writer had somehow created a man who was understandable, recognizable.

She could see at once why Rod was excited. This was the role of a lifetime, demanding more of him than he had ever done. It called for the creation of a complex personality, with many more nuances than he had ever projected on-screen before. It was an ambitious and demanding role, and it was

unquestionably risky for a man who was an established star.

Each time Rod made a new film there were always critics ready to pull him apart, either for giving the same performance or for trying to add new dimensions. She knew there were many who resented what seemed to be an easy rise to fame and fortune. Rod had made it seem easy. He had never bared his early struggles on talk shows or for the gossip magazines. And he never tried to get anyone on his side with a cheap appeal for sympathy.

He rarely talked about the rigorous preparation he put into his work, though he trained like a prizefighter. And at the moment he faced the cameras, he usually knew more about a picture than anyone else involved.

As a result there were many—those who wrote about Hollywood—who believed he was a natural and that he had been blessed with incredible luck. They conceded his particular talent, but they were often patronizing in their descriptions of it, implying that Rod Chapman was a serendipitous fluke—a man who knew how to do one thing, in a period when there was a market for it.

To expose himself now involved a special kind of risk. As a businessman, he could afford to fail. He had made so much money for so many people that even in such a notoriously fickle environment as this, his marketability would not be seriously compromised. But as an actor—well, that was another thing. He knew, as she did, that he could expect little more than total humiliation, shaded perhaps with heavy doses of condescension.

As she finished the last page of the manuscript, the last of many cigarettes and several cups of coffee, she rubbed her eyes and looked over at Rod. He was sitting quietly holding his usual glass of Kentucky bourbon.

"I can see why you want to do this," she said. "It's a wonderful story—and it's a wonderful character."

"And you can see why I wanted you to read it."

"Yes."

"So?"

"So tell me a little more about it. Who's the writer?"

"A young guy. New. He hasn't done much. He's looking for a break. A friend gave this to me—thought I could do something for him. I don't read that many scripts that don't come from my agent, but every once in a while—you know. I've taken an option on it."

"So you're in charge."

"You are, too."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I want to do it, if you say *go*. I can put together a good team, but I want to know if I can count on you. And if you think I can do it without making a fool of myself."

"You know what I'm going to say, don't you? Of course you can do it, if you want to. You can do anything. You haven't begun to..."

He laughed. "Yeah, I guess that's what I wanted to hear. From you. So what do you say? This would take all your time. I haven't even asked what you're doing right now, or if you want to put it aside..."

"There's nothing more important than doing this."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'm not going anywhere, Rod. I've been going sideways for so long—a few months isn't going to make any difference."

He looked at her thoughtfully, as if he hadn't considered the life she had apart from him. She caught the look and laughed nervously. "Hey," she said, "that wasn't self-pity. Come on, I've done okay for a kid from Brooklyn. We can't all be stars."

He looked at her again. "But you should be," he said quietly. "You deserve it, Ellen."

"I'm glad you think so," she said. "That means as much to me as... look, let's stop talking shop for a while. Tell me what else you've been up to, other than what I read in the trades."

"Not much," he said, still looking preoccupied, his thoughts lingering on something else. "You know me, Ellen. I'm a dull guy when I'm not working. That's why I never talk to reporters. They'd die of boredom, and they'd have to make it up. They do anyway, sometimes."

"I've never believed that you're a dull guy."

"You're prejudiced. Tell me about you."

"I'm okay. Noah and I separated..."

"I know."

"You do? I never told you."

"I keep track—I ask questions—people who know you."

"Really?" She flushed, touched and embarrassed at once.

"Sure. You don't expect me to just forget about you when we don't see each other. Now tell me about it. You and Noah—is it okay? Any chance you might get back together again?"

"No," she said, suddenly wanting Rod to know that she was

totally free. "Things haven't been right with us for a long time. I just never talked about it before. I knew we didn't belong together a long time ago, but by then we had a whole life going. And getting loose just didn't seem possible."

"So what changed?"

"Me. I realized I only had one life, and I didn't want to just give it away."

He looked thoughtful again, as if he'd just realized how much of Ellen's life had been compromise and postponement.

"I'm glad then," he said quietly, making her heart leap. "I think you deserve whatever you want—I just told you that, and I mean it. If I can help you, just tell me what you need. I can do things in this town. In New York, too, if that's what you want."

She was grateful—and a little disappointed. Grateful for Rod's concern, disappointed that his offer had been one of career assistance. She smiled. "Thanks, Rod. I appreciate that. Maybe after we get you squared away, I'll take you up on your offer."

"It's the least I can do for you." For a moment neither of them spoke. Then he shifted to a lighter mood. "Want a drink—to kick off this new project?"

"Sure," she agreed, curling her legs under her and settling back on the corduroy couch in an attitude of complete relaxation.

"I know you don't like this stuff I drink. How about champagne?"

"Bring it on."

He went behind the bar and produced a bottle of Pol Roger from the refrigerator, popped the cork expertly and poured her a glass.

"Aren't you having any?" she asked.

"Nope. I stick to what I like. This bottle's all yours."

"I don't know if I can finish all of that," she protested, yet as she sat listening to Rod's ideas on who else would work on the project and the kind of preproduction schedule he hoped to work out, the contents of the bottle rapidly disappeared. She felt so good. It was so right being there, just the two of them. It was as if there never had been anybody else. Just the two of them wrapped in a private glow, sharing the same kind of connection they always seemed to have, no matter how long they had been apart. Even the occasional silence felt cozy and warm. She closed her eyes, pressing the moments close inside

her. Without realizing what was happening, she drifted off to sleep.

The next thing she remembered was the touch of Rod's hand on her shoulder, the sound of his voice, very close, saying her name. She opened her eyes, saw his face just inches from hers, and without quite thinking of what she was doing, her arms reached out to him. His eyes opened in surprise, and then he held her. An intoxicating rush of unbearable sweetness filled her. She did not even try to speak. With her lips, her fingertips, she tried to tell him how much she had loved him, for so many years. It was, for her, almost an act of worship.

There was no awkwardness between them. It was as if they had always been lovers, yet all the years in between made his touch seem acutely sharp, clearly defined, igniting every nerve ending in her body. "Oh, Rod," she finally murmured, "I love you so much, so much. Such a long, long time."

When they lay still together, she started to cry, without knowing why. He wiped her tears with his fingers, kissed her face, touching her ever so gently, as if he had suddenly found her to be delicate, fragile. He held and stroked her quietly until she fell asleep. He covered her with his favorite old army blanket, and then he walked to the telephone and dialed.

"Hello, Sidney," he said. "I know it's late, but I want to see you tomorrow. I just made up my mind about the kind of deal we're going to put together on this project. Come over for lunch and I'll tell you what I want."

She was awakened by the smell of coffee. "Morning, ma'am," he drawled, mocking the style of his usual on-screen character. "Coffee and bagels—as good as you get in New York."

She sat up, feeling a little disoriented and strangely naked.

"Here you go," he said, handing her a shirt, as if he could read her mind. "Take the morning chill off ya, darlin'."

"Thank you," she said quietly. She had no wisecracks, no repartee for the moment. "I seem to have gotten myself smashed last night. I hope I wasn't too obnoxious."

He set the tray down next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "You couldn't be that way if you tried. Don't ever say anything like that around me again. There's nothing you could do to make me think you were less than wonderful."

"Wow," she said, trying still for lightness. "Carte blanche to be a stinker. From the person I like best in the world."

"Ditto," he said. "Now drink your coffee and eat your bagel and cream cheese. I've been up for two hours already, and I'm supposed to be the laid-back one in this group. You New Yorkers are the live wires, remember?"

"I remember." She munched contentedly on her bagel, drank her coffee and thought that this must be one of the happiest days in her life. She didn't really want to consider that nothing had changed, that Rod was still married to Marianne. Last night and today belonged to her. She could make do with that for a very long time.

They spent the morning blocking out some key scenes that Ellen had picked out, and she was surprised at how good he was. Obviously he had done some work on his own. When she gave direction or criticism, he was eager, tense, up, like an athlete ready to perform.

At twelve-thirty, he looked at his watch. "Listen, babe, we're going to have company for lunch. My agent's coming over. I want you to sit and listen while we talk business, and I don't want you butting in, no matter what we say, okay?"

"You're making this sound very mysterious. What are you going to talk about that can't be butted into?"

"You'll see," he said, and he refused to say anything more, in spite of her efforts to tease some information out of him.

When Sidney Harris arrived, Rod made a brief introduction, then led the way to the poolside table, where a light lunch had been set out. Ellen studied Sidney. She had met him once before, briefly. He had been with Rod for at least a dozen years, and this was as much due to Sidney's flexibility as to Rod's loyalty. He was the proverbial opposite side of the coin to his client, portly rather than slender, soft and squishy, in contrast with Rod's tight athletic frame, fair rather than tanned, overdone where Rod was simple. Sidney wore almost every status symbol offered for sale on Rodeo Drive, and this was no mean feat. In full regalia, Sidney looked like a walking boutique display.

Yet in one way they were alike. Each had a laconic, relaxed style that often led people to underestimate their intelligence and determination.

"I want to get started right away," Rod was saying. "You know how to get it moving, Sidney. I don't want to spend three or four months just talking to people. I don't want to hang out in the Polo Lounge flirting and coaxing. I want you to take care of that."

"Rod, sweetheart, I understand. Let me tell you right now—I can move on this right away. I'm against it—I just want to go on record right now as saying I think it's not for you. But if that's what you want—no problem. You're money in the bank. Selling this as a package will be a piece of cake. First we get a director—maybe Scorsese could be right for this, or maybe..."

"Wait, Sidney," Rod interrupted, "that's one of the things I wanted to tell you. This picture's going to be ours—mine and Ellen's. We're going to produce and direct it together. And she's going to play the wife."

Her mouth opened wide with shock, but she remembered Rod's admonition to say nothing.

"Ellen?" Sidney squinted suspicious eyes in her direction, and she could just hear the thought running through his head: Rod's banging this bimbo and he made her a bedtime promise. "Well, excuse me, Rod," he said smoothly, "I'm sure the lady's very capable. And she has a strong reputation in her own field. You know how much respect I have for your talent—as an actor. But we're talking a lot of money now. It could be uphill selling this package, even with you as the star. Money's a little tight these days."

Rod nodded, as if he had considered all these arguments in advance. "I know, Sidney. And I know that you're the person who can loosen it up—if you want to. Talk to people who like to take chances. I have a reputation that counts for something, and Ellen has done some good work. Tell them Redford did it. Tell them this is going to be an Academy Award picture because we're going to have total control over the product. It's going to be good, and it's going to be made cheap. Tell them, Sidney. I'm box office—people will come to see me, no matter what I'm in. And you can also tell them that I'm coming in myself, with my own money."

"Wait a minute, Rod—you know how I feel about that. Leave the investing to people who do it for a living. They win some, lose some, it balances..."

"It's a gesture, Sidney—I want to make it. With as much as I can pry loose from my business manager. That should help you raise the rest. Right?"

"Maybe, but..."

"No buts, Sidney. I know exactly what I want to do here. I'll leave it up to you to figure out how to get it going. Okay?"

Sidney was not a man to waste time losing arguments.

"Whatever you say, Rod. This might take a little longer than I thought, if you're sure about not using a name director."

"I'm sure. Do the best you can, Sidney, and do it as fast as you can. Fair enough?"

"Will do. Thanks for lunch, Rod. It was a pleasure meeting you again, Ellen," he added, but she suspected this pleasantry was a bald-faced lie.

When Sidney was out of earshot, she turned to Rod. "What's this all about?" she asked. "You never said anything yesterday about directing. It's crazy. Sidney's right. It's absolutely crazy."

"No, it isn't. I was thinking about it last night, after you fell asleep. This isn't going to be a commercial picture, going in. I think we'll make money, but it can't be so-so. It has to be great. We've both seen what happens to good properties when you don't have control over the finished product. Suppose I get a director who screws up or a producer who only thinks in dollar signs. Or a leading lady who's a pain in the ass. We'll have arguments and ego problems, and they'll cost time and money and energy that should be going into the picture. Besides," he smiled, "there's no one else in the world I can trust to make me do my best work. You'll be great as the wife—it's a better part than Grace Kelly had in *The Country Girl*."

She considered what he had said. "There's more to it than that, Rod. You could direct and produce this picture yourself. You could get a name as big as yours for the wife. I could still be here to help. I could be your assistant. Consultant, coach, anything else you wanted. If the picture had just your name on it, there might be a few doubts. People might ask: 'Can he really pull it off?' But somebody would gamble that you could. This way—it's going to be tougher. And your own money—my God, nobody does that. Nobody in his right mind. What's making you do it? Why do you think you need to do this for me? I never asked..."

"No," he said quietly. "I want your name all over this picture, right there with mine. I know you never asked. All these years we've known each other, I do all the asking. And the taking."

"But that's not true. You've helped me in so many ways, dozens of times. I can list..."

"Small change, Ellen. Anything I've ever done for you was no effort. A phone call. A couple of words to someone. But you—you give time and energy—everything you've got. And there's never been anything in it for you. Not really."

"That's not true. I'm not that unselfish or noble. It means a lot to me when we work together, when we are together."

"Yeah, well, it does to me, too, but that hasn't been fair either. That's just bits and pieces. It doesn't make a career—or a life for you. What I'm trying to tell you is that it just came home to me—there hasn't been any balance between us. I've had a whole life, a whole career. And it's been goddam selfish of me not to realize before that you haven't. And not to try to do something about it."

Now she understood what he was trying to say. "A whole life," he had said. His life with Marianne and the boys. He was happy with it. He was trying to tell her in his dear, gentle way that he couldn't give her any more than friendship. And so he was giving her what it was in his power to give. An opportunity that any sane woman would kill for. The chance to be his wife—on screen—for just a little while.

"I understand," she said softly. "Thank you, Rod. Thank you for being a friend. And thank you for giving me such a lovely gift."

"It's for both of us, Ellen—trust me—it's for both of us." He reached over and squeezed her hand. His touch traveled to the very heart of her, and it took every bit of strength she had to barricade the sobs that threatened to break through the smile she tried to give him in return.

## *Chapter 35*

MARGO was exhilarated, triumphant. It was done—the last of the prototypes. It had been delivered, tested and found to be good. The Italians were pleased, and this meant more to Margo than anything had in a long time. It was like making it through the first cuts. She knew there would be more problems, more challenges. But for now, she was safe. It was an intoxicating condition.

Thoughts of celebration filled her mind. She wished she could share some of it with Mario, but he would undoubtedly find a way to spoil her pleasure and damage her newfound confidence. Still, there was Kate and the women in the group. They would share her pride in her accomplishments. And perhaps this was a time to say “Thank you” for all the help and support she’d been given.

She sat at the desk that was filled with clutter, assignment sheets, bills, layouts that needed her approval, all testifying to the responsibility, the decision-making power that came with her job. Power—it was new to Margo. First-hand power, her own, not borrowed from her husband. No wonder Mario enjoys business so much, she thought. The money. The excitement. The ability to do things for others.

She thought of Kate. She was working steadily now, but she would probably enjoy a vacation, in some romantic, exotic place. That was manageable, Margo thought. An exchange of favors with the articles editor, and Kate could have a cushy travel assignment that would mean a paid holiday somewhere.

And Ellen—she was long overdue for some breaks. She could feature Ellen in her “Women on the Move” department, a fashion page showing how busy career women planned their morning-till-evening wardrobes. Of course she’d have to coax

Ellen to venture beyond her all-purpose army-surplus look, but the exposure would be terrific for her, bring her to the attention of producers and casting directors and remind people that she was there.

The magazine's early issues would be coming on a wave of expensive publicity—Fabrizio had said something about hiring a major public relations firm to launch a comprehensive publicity campaign. Perhaps she could help get Ellen on one of the talk shows, as part of the magazine's image, as a down-to-earth woman who worked and who didn't have a fortune to spend on clothes.

It was a nice idea and she could make it happen. And once again Mario came to mind. Throughout their marriage he had been the giver of largesse, the dispenser of favors. She wondered if perhaps her new job diminished some of his own pleasure, as she became less needful of his favors. She made a mental note to talk with him. If there was time. If she remembered.

For the moment, she had a more pressing problem to handle. The first major tropical location shoot had been scheduled. While other New Yorkers battled winter's snow and ice, she would be spending three weeks in Martinique, doing summer playwear layouts. She, Margo Pellegrini, was to be in charge of the entire shoot. Photographers, models, makeup artists and hairdressers—they would all be taking orders from her.

Mario wouldn't like it. She had no illusions about that. But maybe, just maybe, she could maneuver him into a neutral position. Sometimes it seemed that he enjoyed helping her, as if she were a child learning new skills, while he played the role of indulgent parent. Other times, well, other times weren't so good as far as this new career was concerned. This location shoot presented major problems, and she would just have to discuss it with him tonight.

The private line on her telephone rang through. "Hello?" she answered.

"Hello," said a husky male voice. "How are you this morning?"

"Excuse me," she said crisply, "I think you must have the wrong number."

"How can you be so sure?" the voice became more seductive.

"Because," she said briskly, "this is a business office."

"That's fine. Perfect. Then you must be ready for a break."

You sound like a very sexy woman. Are you feeling that way now?"

"Excuse me," she repeated, "I think you very definitely have the wrong number." And she hung up.

She went back to the papers on her desk, shaking her head. Obscene phone callers seemed to be getting more sophisticated these days.

A few minutes later, the man called again. "Why do you want to be so unfriendly?" he coaxed.

"I'm sorry, but I really can't talk to you." She hung up, feeling foolish for even attempting a show of good manners with such a person.

"Imagine," she said to her secretary, who had come in to leave some expense account vouchers. "A persistent obscene phone caller, trying to make me feel guilty because I didn't want to talk to him. Actually," she smiled, "he had a lovely voice, almost well-bred."

"Really?" Gloria looked interested. "You should have transferred the call to me. I could use a little excitement these days."

"Excitement? You call an obscene phone call exciting?"

A look of something like resentment crossed the younger woman's face. "Yes," she said, almost defiantly. "We don't all have your life, you know. Some of us live in the real world. And the real world isn't all champagne and caviar."

As Gloria left her office, Margo thought, not for the first time since she had started this job, how natural it must be for women like Gloria to resent her. She had never really taken the time to get to know Gloria—Mario had warned against too much familiarity with those who worked for her. But she did know how much the secretary earned, after taxes. Margo spent more than that on clothes alone.

And although she hadn't been born rich, she had, for a very long time, been protected from the need to make do on limited means. Protected, too, from the realities of being single, alone and yearning for a little romance and color, for the pleasure and affirmation that came from being desired by a desirable man.

She felt a pang of anxiety about the cavalier stance she had taken with Mario. And in a moment of pure honesty, she decided that she liked the rewards of independence, but not any of its hard realities.

"Mario, dear," she began, after trying to soften him up with an unusually good dinner, and the strains of *Aida*, his favorite opera, on the record player. "I want you to know that I've appreciated your patience and your forbearance, these past months. I know it hasn't been easy for you. But if you could understand what this job means to me . . . how it makes me feel about myself . . ."

She searched his face for clues and found none. He was being so northern Italian . . . so cool . . . so in control. He was forcing her to lay it all out. Then he would judge—if he hadn't done so already.

So she tried, as gently as she could, to talk about the new contract, hoping to impress him with the value the Italians had placed on her abilities. As a businessman, he would surely appreciate the fact that she had become worth more, in dollars and cents, on the open market.

When she finished, he was still silent, so she was forced to go on with the really bad news—the location trip. She tried to soften it with details of how smoothly the house would run in her absence and of the ample provisions she'd made to see that all his needs would be taken care of.

"My dear Margo," he said, when she stopped speaking. "You make your projected absence sound so tempting. I can almost believe that I will enjoy your absence as much as I've enjoyed your presence in recent months."

She heard the threat in his words, but she had no choice but to continue the discussion. A decision about her future had to be made. Now. "I didn't mean to do that," she said softly. "I just wanted you to know that I care about your comfort, even when I can't be here. It's not that I don't want to be here. It's just that I find I have certain needs, too. This job—gives me what I need."

"It seems to me," he said in the cool, even voice she hated and feared, "that these needs you refer to, these newly discovered and urgent needs—all of this strikes me as a case of what Americans call having your cake and eating it. You were, dear Margo, a working woman when I met you. As I recall, you were only too glad to give up your career, to share the kind of life I could offer. Now you want to keep all the comforts of that life and to conveniently ignore the fact that I am providing it. You say you want to be a career woman, but you are not really willing to make the sacrifices that involves. You simply want the best of both situations. Don't you think that's

a bit selfish? And unrealistic?"

As usual, Mario's precise, clear logic had cut right through to the heart of the matter. She did want the best of both worlds. She had outgrown the wife-role she had played so willingly for so long. Yet she was not willing to give up anything of consequence for her new career. "All right," she said quietly. "Perhaps you're right. But I feel I can't give it up. Not now, Mario..." her voice was pleading, entreating him to understand.

"Perhaps then it's time to think about a divorce."

His words were like a sharp blow to the midsection. She felt the blood drain from her head, felt she might faint if she didn't get hold of herself. She had expected an argument, some sharp words. She had not expected this. Suddenly the excitement and pleasure of the job turned to ashes. She wanted to say, "No, not a divorce, I'll do what you want, but don't say that word again." But something, some basic survival instinct prevented her, told her that if she backed down now, in this way, she would forever be walking on eggs, always fearful of the next time he would invoke this formidable threat.

And so she mustered every bit of self-control at her disposal and said, almost pleasantly, "Perhaps we should." Then she turned and went into her bedroom. She stretched out on her bed and started to shake with terror. She fought the impulse to go back and apologize, to save herself from the consequences of her own stubbornness. Instead, she took two Valiums and waited desperately for sleep.

Mario sat in his luxurious living room and contemplated the space that had just been vacated by his wife. For the first time during their marriage, his wife had surprised him—with a simple phrase: "Perhaps we should." He had thrown out the word *divorce*, to test, perhaps to intimidate her. He had never expected her to call his bluff and walk away.

He knew, and the knowledge had never particularly disturbed him, that Margo loved their life-style almost as much as she cared for him. He often thought that for her they were inseparable and indistinguishable. He had believed that the loss of what he offered might be, for her, more painful than losing him.

This knowledge had given him a sense of power, and at the same time, it had blunted his interest in her. Once she had been acquired, once the bargain had been sealed, the rituals of court-

ship attended to and dispensed with, he had found better uses for his time than to cultivate his wife. On the rare occasion when he felt any random curiosity, any interest in exploring her personality, Margo was there, always available. At his disposal.

For him, there was never any urgency in the relationship. He had assumed that she would always be there. Or—at least for as long as he wanted her. And because he so rarely had exercised the option of personal conversation with Margo, she seemed for him to be almost frozen in time, from the moment he had married her.

From the Margo he had married, he had expected at least a flicker of dismay when he threatened divorce, a whimper of protest. An attempt to conciliate. Negotiate. He certainly had not expected: *Perhaps we should*. He felt he had lost something. Something important. He wanted Margo to care. For the first time in a long time, he wanted to make her care.

Nothing had been resolved. Nothing at all, Margo reflected, as she looked down from her window seat, down at the tiny buildings of Fort-de-France. She had visited Martinique several times, as a tourist, as Mario's wife. But this time was different. This time she was on her own. It was more exciting—and more frightening.

She felt as if she were walking a tightrope. To try to outbluff Mario was dangerous. She didn't know what had possessed her. Perhaps it was the way he had casually thrown out the word *divorce*. Something—some instinct—was it perhaps the intimate sense of him she had acquired through the years? Something had told her he was bluffing. Something told her that if she went for it, she would be afraid the rest of her life. She would be giving up more than the job, and she would always be living under the threat of that word. So she had bluffed back—with a cold knot of stark terror in the pit of her stomach.

He had been surprised. She could see the look in his eyes. He hadn't been quick enough to hide it. He'd expected her to buckle, perhaps to plead.

In the days that followed, he had not given a single clue to what he was thinking. He'd been polite. And correct, as always. He had not visited her bedroom, but he had not given any sign of total, outright rejection either.

She hated leaving the country with things as they were, but

she felt she had no real choice. If he was waiting her out, he'd expect her to cave in under pressure. She allowed herself a small smile, as she reflected how well Mario had taught her. And she had been a very good pupil, better perhaps than she had imagined.

Her first few hours on the island were spent on the mechanics of getting everyone settled, attending to room reservations and the deployment of paraphernalia and people. It was her responsibility to get twenty-two trunks through customs, to make sure that the photographer, the stylist, the hairdresser, the makeup man and the four models were where they should be. Then she had to give her assistant instructions for the first day's shoot, so that all the clothes could be ironed and all the accessories waiting and ready. It was the kind of administrative situation that her marriage had given her excellent training for.

Miraculously those first few hours went well. There seemed to be none of those personality problems among the group, problems that spoiled dispositions—and showed up on the pictures that cost so much to take. Margo had been concerned about Helena, her all-American, girl-next-door model who had arrived at the airport in tears, announcing dramatically that she and her boyfriend had quarreled and she wished she were dead.

Midway through the flight, Margo had spotted her deep in conversation with Jennifer, her favorite model, an older woman with lovely gray hair. Jennifer had made a small fortune in modeling fees because she had managed to age in a remarkably beautiful and stylish fashion. She was a symbol, a woman who gave hope to other women who saw her pictures, who wanted to believe that a woman could not only be interesting after forty, but also damned attractive. Perhaps it was because she was older, but Jennifer was also a fashion editor's dream. She could be counted on to keep some of the collective neuroses around her in check. She seemed to be removed from the petty bickerings, the small jealousies and ego problems that occurred among the younger girls. She seemed to be able to mother-hen them, to calm them, to foster a nice spirit of cooperation.

After the group was settled, with instructions to get a lot of rest, Margo headed straight for the beach. She massaged a partial sun-block into her skin and stretched out, to await the healing effects of the late-afternoon sun.

Ever since she was a child, she had loved the sun with an almost pagan ferocity. At first, her fair skin had burned easily.

Yet she had persisted in her courtship of its mysterious warmth. She had anointed herself with all kinds of creams and lotions, and finally her devotion had been rewarded. The sun-god had begun to favor her with a golden sheen that burnished her skin and gave a rich lushness to her body. Its rays stretched the skin of her face tight over her facial bones and made her look exotic, fascinating, like a blond gypsy. They streaked her blond hair with shadings of white and silver and copper, made of it a wild tangle of lights and colors, gave her a suggestion of abandon which made her look utterly bewitching. Mario had always responded ardently to her sun-kissed self, and this had made her an even more devoted sun-worshipper.

Now that the warm air and gentle breeze had soothed the tensions out of her body, the sense of being alone returned, making her spirit restless and bringing thoughts of what Mario might be doing in her absence. Alone, she started to reflect on the folly of leaving Mario in a snit to his own devices. It was all too possible that he would escalate their mini-war, that he would break the unspoken fidelity rule he had followed in the past, that he would find a playmate in the city. He might even bring a woman home, just to demonstrate vividly how replaceable she was and how many women would be glad to change places with her, to share Mario's bed and his life—on his terms.

These thoughts frightened her, and she found she could not lie still on the beach. She retreated to her room, ignoring a phone message left by Jennifer with an invitation to join forces for dinner. She ordered a tray from room service: a salad, a bottle of vodka and a bucket of ice. Ignoring her own two-drink maximum rule, she used the liquor as an anesthetic, downing enough of the clear liquid until she knew she would sleep.

She slept, but badly, tossing and turning and waking up at frequent intervals, only to punch the pillows, rearrange the covers and practice the breathing exercises that sometimes soothed her troubled moods.

At six in the morning, she gave up all efforts at rest. She looked in the mirror and thought: There's an image of an unloved woman. Margo had always believed that there was a glow, a beauty that a woman had when she loved and was loved in return. It was, she believed, a subtle aphrodisiac for the rest of the world, the reason why a woman well-loved became more interesting to other men. It was, she reflected,

another of those instances where them that has, gets.

She did the best she could with her lotions and makeup and tried to set her mind firmly on the first day's work. Once again, luck was with her. The first shoot, featuring "Separates for Summer," went smoothly, in spite of a cloudy patch and a bit of mid-morning rain.

Raoul, the photographer, flirted with her as he worked, paying her gallant compliments in between shots. She smiled her encouragement, finding his words and attentions pleasant and soothing. Raoul was straight and reasonably attractive, and his admiration put a little distance between her and total panic at the prospect of losing Mario.

When he asked her to join him for drinks on the veranda of the Meridien Hotel, she agreed readily, eager for more reassurance that there were plenty of men out there who would still find her interesting and desirable. Raoul did not disappoint her.

As soon as they ordered their first round of piña coladas, he leaned toward her and said: "You look simply marvelous, Margo, even after a full day's work. Right now, you're much more beautiful than any of the girls on the shoot."

She laughed. "Don't let them hear you say that, please. We're bound to have enough ego problems as it is."

"But it's true, Margo. You have gorgeous bones, exquisite skin. Let me shoot some pictures of you tomorrow, please? You'll like them, I'm sure. Let me show you what I see when I look at you . . ."

"Sorry, Raoul, my on-camera days are over. Done. *Finito*. And I'm not a bit sorry. But thanks for the compliments. A woman always appreciates compliments."

"Then why are you making them so impersonal? I'm talking to you—not to 'a woman.'"

"Because making them personal could create problems for us both. You're a good photographer. I'm a fashion editor—a married fashion editor. I enjoy working with you. I don't want to do anything to change that."

"I'll accept what you're saying—for now. But there's something on your face, something I haven't seen before. It makes me wonder if there's more to your story than just married fashion editor."

"That's all I'm going to discuss with you, Raoul. Please, let's leave it alone."

They sat for a while, sipping their drinks, listening to the

seductive rhythms of the steel band, to the gentle crooning of the male singer, with his velvety renditions of the love songs that made up romantic lounge music all over the tourist world. As the vocalist launched into the plaintive strains of "Amor," Raoul took her hand and pulled her from her seat to the tiny dance floor. He danced smoothly, expertly, with a confident, fluid grace.

It had been a long time since she'd danced. Mario didn't care much for dancing. He did it stiffly, without any natural sense of rhythm, without any connection to the music. It was, she realized, one of the few things he did not seem to do well.

This is fun, she thought, humming to the music. She closed her eyes and leaned into Raoul's shoulder. He tightened his hold on her, pulled her closer. She knew she shouldn't allow this little intimacy, but the moment felt too good to spoil. Her skin was still warm from the sun she'd soaked up during the day's work, her body relaxed from the sweet rum drink. They remained on the dance floor until the musicians finished their set.

When they came back to their table, Raoul ordered more drinks, then asked: "What about dinner? Where would you like to go?"

She wondered if she should let that assumption pass, that they were going to have dinner together. She did. "I don't know," she answered. "We could eat here if you like. They have a Creole buffet, and later there's a performance by a folk dance troupe. It's fun. Mario, my husband, and I have seen them."

"That sounds good to me. Do we need to change?"

"Not really."

"Good. Then let's take a walk on the beach before we go to dinner."

It was a suggestion that had vaguely romantic overtones, but Margo resisted the urge to remind him that this was a business trip, that they were sharing some leisure time as associates, nothing else. She stopped herself. It was up to Raoul to watch his step, she thought defiantly. If he got out of line, he'd be the one who lost a valuable client. She was in control here. Very definitely. She enjoyed the feeling, new as it was to her.

She savored that feeling as they strolled down the hotel steps onto the white sandy beach, kicked off their sandals and walked aimlessly on the fine, talc-like sand and watched the

beginings of a spectacular orange and gold sunset. Raoul didn't make any more personal remarks. In fact, he said nothing at all, and Margo was perfectly comfortable with the silence. She suspected Mario would be livid with rage if he saw this little scene. He was potentially a very jealous man, and he had warned her—just once—that she had better not test this potential, that she would be sorry if she did.

"It's been a very pleasant evening, Margo. I thank you for the company."

"Yes, it has been nice. I thank you, too."

"I really hate to bring it to an end," he said.

"Me, too," she agreed, not at all anxious to return to an empty room, to the nagging anxiety about her marriage.

"Why don't you invite me for a drink?" he suggested, as they approached her room.

"Not a bad idea," she said, meaning exactly that. As long as she was in charge, she knew she could easily get rid of Raoul after a nightcap and a little more conversation. "It's such a gorgeous night. I could sit up for hours and just look at the stars."

"You can do that, if you let me look at you," he flirted.

Margo laughed and opened the door. She reached for the light switch, then realized that the light was already on.

A figure emerged from the balcony, into the room. "Good evening, Margo."

She turned so abruptly that she felt her neck snap. "Mario," she whispered. "What a surprise," she said inanely.

"So I see." His voice was harsh, accusing. "I thought I would surprise you. I see I have. And," he added bitterly, "it turns out I've surprised myself as well."

She turned back to Raoul. "Give me a raincheck on the drink," she pleaded. "I'll see you in the morning."

The photographer left quickly, without a word in Mario's direction.

"Mario," she began, "you didn't tell me . . . how on earth . . . ?"

"I thought about you after you left. I thought perhaps I had been a little rigid. I thought I would surprise you," he repeated. "That was a very interesting little scene—with that man. Is he one of your employees? Was he here on his own time? Or was he performing one of his after-hours duties?"

She heard the controlled rage in his voice, saw the tension

and strain in his face. This was not the Mario who would rather die than make a show of emotion.

"Mario," she said, reaching for the words that would reassure him, "Raoul and I just went out to dinner. That's all. We just decided to have a drink before we retired. You know how it is when you're working . . ."

A flicker of something like pain showed on his face, and she immediately regretted her choice of words. She knew exactly how it was when he was working away from home—and that was exactly what he was imagining now.

"It's just business," she insisted, "a way to spend a few hours. Mario—listen—would I be crazy enough to jeopardize our marriage for a bit of nonsense? Really? Do you think that of me? And do you think there's any man I'd find half as attractive and desirable as you are?"

His face twisted with doubt. "I don't know." He shook his head. "I might have answered that question easily once. Now I don't know. I don't know why you make your choices. I don't know what is attractive—or valuable to you."

He was insecure, she realized with a shock. This handsome, successful, powerful husband of hers was actually feeling insecure. This revelation left her almost in awe. She had always believed she was not nearly as important to Mario as he was to her. She didn't know what to say.

"You're probably tired," she said, in an attempt to soothe him. "Why don't we just relax for a little while, have some brandy and . . ."

"Stop it," he spat out between clenched teeth. "Don't you dare take that tone with me. Don't ever patronize me. And don't talk to me as if I were too stupid to see the obvious."

"But I wasn't—really, I wasn't . . ." Margo was confused and alarmed at the turn the conversation was taking, with the two of them spinning in separate orbits. "Mario, please don't misunderstand me. I just want to make things all right between us."

"That," he said stiffly, "may not be possible. And now, I think I will be going, since there's no point in having a pointless discussion. I have my own suite here—I had thought you might enjoy the added space and comfort. I plan to take the first available flight to New York."

She wanted so much to stop him, but the coolness of his manner paralyzed her. As always, he had the power to freeze

her in mid-thought, in mid-word or gesture. He could make her feel silly and ineffectual, and she watched him leave with a rising panic in her chest.

When she was alone, she tried to calm herself, to reassure herself that what had just happened was not the end of the world. She told herself she always felt unbalanced when Mario was displeased with her. But this felt more dangerous. She knew she had somehow disconnected her husband from his usually ironclad sense of himself. She feared that this would be held against her, would be judged as more than a minor misdemeanor. She didn't know what she could do about it—but she knew what she couldn't do. She couldn't just let Mario leave. Not like this. Not with two weeks of shooting ahead of her. A lot could happen to a marriage in that time.

Alone in his suite, Mario began to repack his partly unpacked suitcase. He had been so pleased with himself when he decided to make the trip to Martinique. It had been a completely uncharacteristic and symbolic gesture on his part. It had been his way of trying to thaw the cold-war atmosphere that had enveloped their marriage.

After Margo had left, without bending an inch, he had thought about a divorce. He had startled himself when he realized just how much he did not want a divorce. His second shock came when he also realized that there were qualities in the new Margo that he rather liked. He had often been bored with his conventional, highly stylized marriage, with the handmaiden his wife had become. When he thought about it, he told himself that this was more or less the nature of a good marriage—at least the kind of marriage he had believed he required.

Yet there was something, he had to admit, something in this new and alien wife, something that had evoked the first stirrings of interest and curiosity he'd felt in years. This new spark—it had made her more provocative than the other beautiful women he had known. It had revived that small element, the little bit of elusiveness, that kind of distance that made courtship so exciting—it was this quality that had returned to their relationship. It had reminded him of how desirable his wife was, never more so than when she was not quite so accommodating, not so totally his.

Of course he never would have dreamed of telling her such a thing. That would have been an invitation to insurrections of

all kinds, an end to the order he believed he needed. He did not have the time or energy to court and woo his wife. It was time he could better put to other uses. Or so he had believed.

Now he did not know what he believed. She had looked so lovely when she had walked into the hotel room, so full of life and purpose, eyes sparkling with laughter. And then he had seen the other man—young and attractive—the two of them obviously engaged in some private conversation. He was certain he had interrupted a romantic interlude, and the thought had almost made him physically ill.

She had tried to reassure him, yet the gesture had made him feel worse. She had animated his Italian horror of betrayal, and once it was unleashed, he was appalled at his own vulnerability. More than anything, he had wanted to take her in his arms, to love her. Yet he had held back. Pride and fear and something else held him back. Perhaps it was the need to punish her for making him feel this way.

He had left her. And now he would have to leave this island. There could be no question of exposing himself any further. He sighed and closed the straps on his leather suitcase.

She stood outside the door of his suite and tried to compose herself. She had cajoled the desk clerk into giving her the number and faced the tiny smirk that followed. She had tried to rehearse what she would say when he opened the door, but she wasn't sure she could get the words out, not if he fixed her with one of those glacial aristocratic stares.

She tapped firmly, and after a moment, he was there, shirt open, ready for bed, staring at her—unable to hide his surprise.

"May I come in?"

"*Prego.*" He swung open the door to let her pass.

"I've come to negotiate," she said evenly. "Or even to capitulate, if I have to." She laughed nervously. "I know it's bad business to tell you that in advance, but I care too much to be shrewd and clever. Isn't that the real truth, Mario? To negotiate really brilliantly, it has to not matter, not all that much. Well, this matters. You matter. I realize that without you, everything else would turn to ashes for me. I'm here to tell you that if this job of mine is going to destroy our marriage, I'll give it up. I'll go back to being the old Margo. The Margo who needed the marriage—because she didn't have anything else. Is that blunt enough for you?"

"But if that's what you choose—if you choose a woman

who simply needs you, instead of a woman who has other concerns but wants you very much, then you're going to lose something. Something that I would like to think was more important than the mere presence of a warm body."

"Really." He was smiling now, almost in spite of himself. "And what is that?" he asked, his tone not at all sarcastic or ironic, but genuinely interested in what she was saying.

"You would lose a woman who was really there, all there for you, who could really appreciate and savor the tie you shared together."

He smiled again. "You make it all sound so irresistible. Then why hasn't it been like that? If you'll excuse my saying so, the marriage, from my point of view, has seemed damned awful."

"I know," she said softly, realizing for the first time how it really must have seemed to him. "I was so busy trying to prove nothing had changed—which was a lie. I got so caught up in that, I was never able to share with you all the good things that were happening to me. I want to . . . oh, I want to, so much . . ." she trailed off.

He took her hand, enveloped it with his. "Let's see," he said gently. "Let's just see."

"Oh, Mario." She heaved a sigh of relief and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Stay the night here," he said. "I'll fly back tomorrow. But I'll be waiting for you, after you finish your work."

She was almost giddy with gratitude. It was going to be all right. She clung to him, and they made love with hunger, with relief, with sheer pleasure that they had reached a bad bump in the road and survived it.

"I feel like a shipwrecked sailor who's just been rescued," she whispered.

He pulled her closer. "I know. I don't want to lose you now. Not when you've become such a crack negotiator."

They laughed like drunken teenagers and turned out the lights.

## Chapter 36

IT was a lovely spring day. A day to quicken the pulse and lighten the heart. A count-your-blessings day. And that was exactly how Kate felt. She had two wonderful children. Magnificent children, she amended. Good friends. Satisfying work. A nice place to live. Not luxurious, this funny walk-up tenement flat, but more and more it felt like home. Now she had the money, more than enough, to make other choices, but she was in no hurry to move.

She bustled around the apartment, straightening up the morning clutter, and the motion gave her pleasure. She put a tape on the expensive deck she'd bought with money from her first royalty check, and she hummed along with the plaintive love songs, the same ones that had made her cry after that last fight with Greg.

Love gained, love lost. It was all part of life, and today Kate was liking life very much indeed. Margo was fairly spilling over with happiness these days. And Ellen—well, Ellen was quieter, sadder, more subdued these days—but she was right up there, doing what she'd always dreamed of doing.

She, Kate Sherwood, was glad to be alive. One of these days, she'd have to call Paul and remind him that he had won his bet, many times over. She could look at Harry and know for a certainty that she was better without him. He had been right, exactly right, for the woman she had once been. Today, she couldn't regret the marriage, not any part of it, nor would she brood over any of the mistakes that were behind her.

The children had gone to spend the day with Harry, but they would be back for dinner. The visits didn't bother her anymore. Josh and Sarah needed Harry, too. Good, bad, indifferent, he was the only father they had, and what they didn't get from

him, they could find somewhere else, if they had the courage to look for it.

She decided she would prepare a special meal for them. Funny, she thought—all the homemaking, all the nest-making things she had done when Harry was around, she still did them, not so regularly, not so compulsively. But they all took on a different meaning now. She didn't need to prove anything to anyone. She didn't need to win anyone's approval for her domestic skills. Now when she was busy, she bought take-out food. And when she cooked, it was because she wanted to, as an expression of something she felt.

Today it would be a labor of love, part of her celebration of life. She would go down into the richness of her neighborhood, to soak up all the sights and sounds and smells. She would enjoy the quiet time alone. She would wander through the bakeries, the grocery stores, the butcher shops, buy a little of this and some of that. And later, she would make it all into a feast to share with her children.

She hummed along with Johnny Mathis, enjoying the fact that there was no one around to tease her about the corny music she enjoyed. She wasn't exactly happy. Nor was she unhappy. There was a lot she could wish for. But it was okay the way it was. She gave the pillows on her bed a final fluff, and as an afterthought, sprayed them with her favorite perfume. Tonight she would enjoy the fading fragrance as she fell off to sleep.

She looked at herself in the full-length mirror, and she liked what she saw. A trim, better-than-average figure, in well-fitting jeans and a crisp oxford shirt. There was a clarity and a sparkle in her eyes. Her jawline looked clean and strong, her nose straighter, her cheekbones well-defined by blusher. Her hair was streaked, not so much by sun as by Mr. Ramon's magic-in-a-bottle, and it fell to her shoulders in a simple straight line. The mirror reflected exactly what she felt—purpose and buoyancy and optimism.

She locked her door carefully and ran down the stairs. As she closed the outside door behind her, she heard a familiar voice.

"Kate?"

She whirled around. "Greg! What are you doing here?"

"I was waiting for you. I hoped you'd come out sooner or later. I called earlier to see if you were home. Then I hung up."

"Was that you? Why didn't you say something?"

"I was afraid you'd hang up on me. I didn't want to come up because I was afraid you'd slam the door in my face. So I thought I'd hang around here awhile. I figured if I caught you in the street, you'd have to talk to me."

She laughed in spite of her confusion. "You'd better not tell any of this to your patients. It sounds like real kid stuff. I don't think I would have hung up. Or slammed any doors."

"That's nice to know," he said quietly. "Could we talk now?"

"Sure," she said, noticing that he looked drawn and tired. He looks unhappy, she thought. This has been hard on him, too. The knowledge that she mattered made her confident. "Come on upstairs," she said. "You've been standing outside long enough."

He followed her up the stairs and waited quietly while she reopened her door. "It's nice in here," he said, as they walked through the long hallway into the small living room. "I almost forgot how warm it is—your home."

"I know," she said. "It's because I'm in it. With Josh and Sarah. Good things happen here. That's what makes it warm."

He laughed. "You didn't wait for the compliment. I was going to give it to you. You're different, Kate. There's something new about you."

She didn't answer. She just stared at the familiar face, a face that could be devilishly infuriating when it was closed against her, soft and dreamy and loving a minute later. She tried to meet the velvety brown eyes that had laughed with hers so often, that had glazed over with passion when she had touched him. But he looked away, fidgeting nervously. "So how have you been?" he asked.

"Some good days, some bad. Today is one of the good ones."

"I'm glad. I hope I don't spoil it."

"I won't let you," she said with conviction. "Can I get you some coffee?"

"Coffee would be nice."

"Come into the kitchen. We can talk while I fix it."

As Greg sat at the butcher-block table, the same one Harry had pounded when he'd made his farewell pronouncement, Kate ground the dark beans that made her favorite brew, New Orleans coffee with chicory.

"Smells nice," he said.

"Yes, it does. Was there something special you wanted to see me about?" This newest Kate wasn't waiting to have her questions answered.

"There's always been something special about seeing you. I just kept forgetting that."

Her heart did a fast flip-flop, and suddenly it was as if they hadn't been apart, as if there had been no cruel words and no separation. Here you come again, she thought. Here you come, Greg Hardy, just when I thought life was perfectly okay without you. And I'm glad. She said nothing, waiting for him to explain.

"I'm here on business," he began, and her heart fell back into place. Then, as if he saw disappointment on her face, he stopped and started over. "That was just an excuse. I thought about coming around a dozen times and just saying I missed you and I wanted to try it again."

"So why didn't you?"

"For all the wrong reasons. Insecurity, stubbornness, pride—all those things I try to help my patients get over."

"I forget," she said softly, finally finding his eyes. "I forget that you're not so different from the rest of us."

They sipped their coffee in silence for a while, and there was no awkwardness between them. Fingertips touched tentatively across the table, and then his hand covered hers, in the familiar gesture that always warmed her.

"Now that I've told you why I'm really here," he said, "let me tell you about the business part."

She waited expectantly, not jumping in to fill the pause, as she once might have.

"Our publisher called a couple of days ago. They want us to do another book. . ."

"Oh, no," she laughed, clutching at her throat in mock horror, unable to resist the humor of the situation. "Not again. . . oh, God, what on earth could we write about this time? *How to Fall in Love and Make Each Other Miserable?*"

"Yeah," he laughed with her. "I guess we could do that with some authority. . . Actually, I don't think they much care what we write about, as long as they can say: 'By the authors of the best-selling et cetera, et cetera.'"

"I'm sure you're right," she said, still laughing. "So what did you tell them?"

"I said I'd have to talk to the better half of this team. . . because I wouldn't want to do it without you."

"Thank you," she said, liking that part very much.

"And I do have an idea . . . it came to me while I was thinking about you . . . and us. How about if we call this one *What Do You Say After "I Love You"*? We could figure it all out as we go along . . ."

She was touched by Greg's suggestion. This one would be for them. It was an idea that two people could spend a lifetime exploring . . . "Hey . . . wait a minute," she said. "You never said you loved me."

He flushed, and the little boy in him surfaced, the one she had fallen in love with. "I thought you knew," he mumbled.

"That's okay," she said softly. "I never told you either."

He touched her cheek, and she felt a return of the intimacy that had been so precious—and unreliable. "So can we try it all again?"

She started to say yes and then she stopped. She looked him directly in the eye and said: "I need to know about L.A. I need to know what happened—why you did the things you did."

"You're not going to let me get away with that, are you?" he asked, but she could see that he was more amused than annoyed.

"Nope. Like they say in the movies, you'll have to answer for that. And besides, you shouldn't want me to let you get away with anything. What kind of . . ."

"Okay," he laughed. "I get the message. I was angry with you when we went to L.A. I thought you were being stubborn and pigheaded and unreasonable. Don't interrupt—you asked me to tell you, so quiet up and listen. I thought you didn't care enough about me or you wouldn't be hesitating. When that woman started coming on, it felt flattering and . . . and I was glad you were there to see it . . . that another woman thought I was terrific."

He looked so sheepish when he finished that she started to laugh, too. "Oh, well," she said, "now that you've explained it so scientifically, now I can see how wrong I was to think you were just another weak-minded male who would fall for the blatantly obvious, manipulative, seductive . . ."

"Whoa, there," he protested, "take it easy . . ."

"Sexist, cheap . . ."

He leaned over and kissed her, firmly and decisively. "You know," he said after he had released her, "it occurs to me that I've been very dumb about one thing . . ."

"Just one?"

"Shut up," he said pleasantly, and then went on: "Now I couldn't help but notice how agreeable you become, how unargumentative and, yes, almost docile you become when," he paused, "when we're engaged in, shall we say, the more physical part of our relationship. So," he said pulling her up and holding her close, "that's when we're going to have all our serious discussions from now on." He walked her toward her bedroom and stopped in the doorway. "But, first," he said, "just for the record—first you have to tell me what all that stuff you were doing in L.A. was all about."

"I was jealous," she whispered in his ear. "Crazy jealous. Can you help me, Doctor? Please?"

"We'll work on that tomorrow," he said huskily, as he started to unbutton her shirt. "Or maybe tonight. . . ." But Kate was no longer listening.

"That's a lovely tan you have, dear," Janine said admiringly to Ellen. "Have you been on vacation? Is that why you haven't been here in a while?"

"No, I've just been spending a lot of time in L.A. It's what you might call my big break," she said with a touch of irony. "I'm going to make a picture with Rod Chapman." She paused for the exclamations that followed.

"Rod Chapman! That is impressive," Margo said. "What are you doing—coaching dialogue?"

"Everything," she said, trying to feel the pride and pleasure that she should be feeling. "This is it, folks—the brass ring, the answered prayer. Yours truly is the leading lady, the co-producer and the assistant director."

"That's wonderful," Janine said. "You deserve it, Ellen. You've worked hard for a long time, and I'm sure you're very gifted."

"I am," Ellen said slowly. "Yes, I really am. Here's where I get the chance to show my stuff. I'm going to be good," she went on, almost to herself, "I'm going to be better than good. I'm going to be great. And when this picture is done, I'm going to be somebody in this business."

"How does that feel?" Myra asked.

Ellen smiled softly. She had no wisecracks for this occasion. "Not the way I dreamed it," she said softly. "And now I have no more dreams left." She was quiet for a moment. "Hey, listen," she said, forcing some brightness into her manner, "I'm

not complaining. What I've got isn't everything, but it's a lot. And I'm going to make it work. Dreams—well, maybe I can cook up some new dreams."

"That's good," Rose said. "That's how I feel now. Peaceful, you know? Not just sad. Maybe none of you know what I feel for my son. He's not such a burden to me. He makes me happy. I wish John could feel it, too..." she trailed off, lost for a moment in her own thoughts. "But he doesn't," she said firmly. "Now I don't have to struggle between them anymore, and I have a little peace of mind."

As Kate listened to the woman speak, she thought that Rose did seem more composed, less harried than she had been. Her face was less pinched, her grooming more careful. "How is it going with John?" she asked.

"He comes around, once, maybe twice a week. He doesn't yell about Joey any more. Last night he took us out to a restaurant, and he didn't act like he was ashamed to be with us."

"That's good," Kate said. "Do you think you might get together again?"

"God knows," Rose sighed. "I sure don't. I'll tell you one thing, though, last night we felt like a family. More than when he was home. Maybe... I don't know..."

Margo cleared her throat. "I have an announcement to make—I don't think I'll be coming back."

Kate was startled. "You never mentioned... why, Margo?"

"I've made some decisions about what's important to me. I've decided my marriage is my first priority. I can always get another job if I choose to. Perhaps it wouldn't be as good as the one I have, but I feel I can do it. Perhaps I could get another husband, but I know that I don't want another husband. That makes everything clearer for me."

"But why are you giving up the group?" Kate asked.

"I know I haven't mentioned this before, but I have been thinking about it. I think it would be better for my marriage if I discussed our problems directly with Mario. I think he'd prefer it if I didn't talk about personal matters with outsiders. And I'll be better off if I can find the courage to tell him what I'm thinking, instead of trying it out somewhere else first."

"I don't know if you realize this," Myra said, "but in all the time you've been coming here, this is the first time you've referred to Mario in human terms. You've described what you find desirable and attractive. But when you've talked about feelings, it's always been your feelings, your frustration or

anger or disappointment. And that's what we're here for, of course. But you've taken the next important step, in trying to see both sides of this relationship. I'm sure we'll all miss you. And I'm sure you're going to be just fine."

"Thanks. Kate will let you know what's happening with me."

Kate nodded. "That's a promise. You'll all be seeing a lot of me. I'm seeing Greg again."

"I'm not surprised," Janine said.

"You aren't?"

"No, dear. I think we all knew you were in love with him."

Kate was incredulous. "Even after the Los Angeles fiasco? After I told you how I am with him?"

"Absolutely," Ellen said. "You know, for a professional advice-giver, you can be pretty dumb. You're crazy about the guy. You're just hung up about admitting it."

Kate laughed. "Yeah, I guess that's true. Between the two of us, Greg and I have so many insecurities, and we keep on tripping over them, like little kids. Anyway, he's asked me to work on a new book, and that's what we're going to do. Maybe we'll get the relationship straight, too, this time."

"Think of it this way," Ellen said, "if that doesn't work, you'll get another best-seller out of the deal. And that ain't bad."

Kate laughed again. "No, it ain't."

Myra looked at her watch. "We have just a little time left. There's someone I want you to meet. I'll just go outside to see if she's here."

She walked out into the reception area and returned with a woman wearing a shapeless navy-blue sweatsuit. As the two of them approached the group, the other women could see that the newcomer was very young. She wore her light brown hair in a ponytail, and there were braces on her teeth.

"This is Carla Howard," Myra said. "She's going to be joining us. Perhaps the rest of you could introduce yourselves, give her a chance to familiarize herself with the group."

While the regulars gave their names and bits of biographical information, Carla Howard perched on the edge of her chair, blinking her eyes and looking toward the door. And when the introductions were finished Myra asked her: "Do you want to tell us something about yourself tonight? Just to get started?"

Casting a last furtive glance at the door, Carla took a deep breath and began to speak, her eyes shifting to her feet. "I'm

twenty-three years old. I have a degree in civil engineering, and I just started to work for the city. I'm with men all the time and I've never had a date. I used to think it was because I was fat. Last year my parents sent me to a fat doctor, and I lost forty-eight pounds. Nobody looks at me twice anyway. Dr. Hatfield says I have a poor self-image, but why shouldn't I? Look at me. I'm homely, I'm . . ."

"Hold it, hold it," Ellen interrupted. "I don't want to step on your lines, kid, but I want to give you the benefit of my wisdom now, in case I'm not around next week. First, you must have some smarts to be an engineer, so that's one in the plus column. Second, you ain't homely—a little plain, maybe, but that's okay—you can do a lot with *plain*. But you've gotta start up here," she tapped her head. "Look at me. Not exactly Cheryl Tiegs, right? Right. But here I am, on my way to be in a movie with Rod Chapman. Because I knew what was special about me. Let me tell you a story about Goldie, my Aunt Irene's girl. A regular bow-wow. But she didn't think so. Why? Because Aunt Irene told her, every day of her life, that she was a regular princess. You know what? That ugly girl is today, even as we speak, alive and well in Scarsdale, married to a dermatologist—a regular prince. And a great catch, as my momma used to say. Are you impressed? Good. We can help you a lot right here. First, you gotta stop seeing yourself as a fat, lumpy nothing. Look at that stuff you're wearing—it's got no shape. Go get yourself some good clothes—I can show you a place in Soho . . ."

"Ellen," Myra interceded, "maybe you should take it easy with Carla. She's new to this, and she doesn't know any of you well enough . . ."

"No," Carla said, her expression brighter, more interested now. "It's all right—I like what she's saying . . ."

"You like it?" Ellen grinned. "You got it. Stick with this group and you're gonna get—oh, are you gonna get better every day. Gorgeouser and smarter and maybe even rich and famous. You want dates? You'll get dates. In this crowd here, we've got more smarts, more talent, more everything—and it's all gonna be yours, kid." She brought her face close to Carla's. "Do you believe me?"

"I—I don't know," Carla faltered, not quite knowing how to take Ellen or what she was saying.

"Bingo!" Ellen exclaimed. "The kid said the magic words." She stuck out her hand. "Welcome to the club."